

The TriSchool Tournament

A/N: Here's a story I wish I had found when I read GoF or some of the GoF fanfiction. More and harder challenges; more contestants allowed to participate. A slightly different ending for Voldemort! So I decided to write it myself as a series of impressions and scenes. (GoF, and the Triwizard Tournament, still remains my favorite bit of canon. I automatically smile if I even think of the phrase, "blast-ended skrewt.")

Observant!Smart!Harry. On the outs with Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore, and Hogwarts in general. No pairings.

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Harry Potter was not looking forward to his fourth year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He'd loved his first year – being introduced to magic, a fun castle, surprises around every corner, a puzzle or two to solve. But that changed when he pieced together that the Stone and Harry had been brought together in some kind of misguided training exercise by the Headmaster. Then Harry disliked his second year – being thought evil by a school full of people who couldn't past see their own noses. And then his third year just confirmed all his worst suspicions. He began to hate Hogwarts with a passion. Witches and wizards were worse than ditzy blonde Muggles. None of them had a lick of sense or more than two neurons to rub together. Sirius Black, escaped murderer, had proven innocent. No one had ever tried him before a court – or tried to explain why he would have been Voldemort's most feared supporter. Nothing these idiots did made sense. Snape had tried to have Sirius kissed by a Dementor. Snape had been nothing but a dark plague for Harry's entire Hogwarts 'experience.'

At least Sirius was free now. Free and hugging Harry Potter almost to tears. Harry wasn't embarrassed, even though Sirius was doing this on Platform 9 ¾ thirty minutes before Harry was to return to Hogwarts.

"This is it, Sirius. My last year at this place. I can't stand it. The staring, the whispers. The idolization one minute, the unmerited fear

the next. I'm getting tutors over the summer and I'm getting my OWLs done with. Then we can discuss NEWTS, more tutors..."

"But it's Hogwarts, Harry..."

"It's not a good school. The teachers are either incompetent or they're blatantly unfair in a way that makes it a misery, even McGonagall can't stand up for what's right. It's not a safe place for me to stay as I've been attacked there by fellow students, by teachers, by magical beasts. Detentions at midnight for eleven-year-olds into the Forbidden Forest; do the people there even have brains? And my friends – they're just as fair weathered as anyone else I've met. I swear to you, Sirius, this is it..."

"We're going to have to have a long talk at some point. I need to know what's happened exactly to make you feel like that. Dumbledore..."

Harry just looked sour. "...was the man who didn't ensure you got a trial, Sirius, even though it was his main responsibility on the Wizengamot. He was the moron who condemned me to a life in Little Whinging. He's a Master Legilimens and couldn't figure out who was opening the Chamber of Secrets or that one of his teachers was possessed by Voldemort. He concocted some bizarre plan last year for Hermione and me to face an executioner, a hippogriff, a werewolf, Peter Pettigrew, and a hundred dementors – that was his choice rather than just insisting you actually receive a trial and vetoing the corruption that called for Buckbeak's killing. The Wizengamot head carries a lot of personal power to counterbalance the Minister's, Sirius, he can suspend any governmental order for a year just by demanding it, and he's never used it to do anything useful that I can see. He's a frail, old man, Sirius, his judgment is beyond suspect, and he should have been pensioned off years ago."

Sirius frowned. "I'll be up for Quidditch weekends, Harry..."

Harry shook his head. "There is no inter-house Quidditch this year. But maybe you can come for the tasks of the TriSchool Tournament..."

“Right, right. I forgot. Definitely. From what the new Minister said, it sounds like it could be quite a sight.”

“I might even toss my name in the hat just to ensure I get the full Hogwarts experience this year...”

Sirius smiled. He could tell this was Harry trying to humor him. Still, it made Sirius feel better about the whole thing.

“Last chance, kiddo. Sure you don’t need a new ‘pet’ this year, say a massive Grim to scare that Divination professor with?”

“I got out of that class. Worthless, waste of time. Why do they even offer it? Sure, the woman made a true prophecy, in front of me even, but it’s a gift, not a learned skill...”

“Runes, then?”

“Yeah, I did the reading over the summer. It’s just like learning a language. I started French in school...probably should finish that off sometime. Maybe we could find an apartment in Paris next summer? Learn by immersion?”

Sirius laughed at Harry’s hopeful expression.

“Your mind is so scattered today, Harry. Crawl on the train and take a nap. And try not to snap at anyone. The year will be over before you know it... And we’ll talk about everything.”

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“...the special treat is that Hogwarts will be hosting the first ever TriSchool Tournament. In the distant past, other tournaments chose a single representative, or champion, to represent a school. In this new format, many more students will be able to participate in seven very difficult, very dangerous tasks. Each of the first six tasks will be completed by twenty of our students – and an equal number from the other two schools, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang – and no student may compete in more than three of those challenges. The seventh and final challenge will be composed of the five top performers from

the earlier events from each school. Hogwarts will utilize a neutral judge to determine the make-up of the first six teams... More information will be distributed by your Heads of House. So, tuck in!"

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Hogwarts had almost tripled in size. It was to be house the entire student body for three magical schools for most of the year. Harry thought there was an upside there – maybe kids from France and Eastern Europe weren't as stupid as the ones from Britain. And maybe Harry could study Potions from a real teacher – or History – or... The list was actually quite long.

Harry watched when the seven flying carriages arrived. The Abraxans were quite fascinating beasts. Then he turned and observed the three Durmstrang ships arrive in the Black Lake. Harry was genuinely curious how these ships, even traveling underwater, could have arrived in a land-locked lake. Oh well. Magic.

The unexpected highlight of the evening was listening to and then observing the International Confederation of Warlock's procedures for security. Apparently, given the British Ministry's massive ineptitude providing security 1) for the World Cup and 2) for the late Minister Fudge who had been killed by his mistress' embittered husband, Rolando Umbridge, the ICW had imposed rigorous security procedures. Every adult in contact with the children was taken off into an anteroom to be questioned under veritaserum. Alastor Moody and Severus Snape came out only in chains. Turned out that 'Moody' was using Polyjuice and was actually an escaped Death Eater. Durmstrang lost four to the security protocol, including its Headmaster, Igor Karkaroff. Beauxbatons lost only its Charms instructor, who was actually an American felon hiding out in France.

Harry decided that he might possibly have a good year at Hogwarts now that Snape was gone. It was a good thing he had hung back to see what was what. He was one of the few students who saw these very interesting results.

Dumbledore was screaming himself hoarse when Harry finally left the surprisingly entertaining dinner. "But, Severus, you can't take

Severus. I don't have anyone who can deal with those horrid little snakes. I don't want to deal with them and I can't just expel all those beasts because the school would go bankrupt..."

The old man was surely past retirement if he was showing his cards in such a way. The ICW staffers looked aghast at Dumbledore's begging – and his stated reason for begging. Harry knew the story would be out in the public domain tomorrow and in the papers the day after that.

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All of the Hogwarts students were gathered in the Great Hall. The first task was the next day and tonight was the selection of the twenty participants. Harry had entered his name on a lark.

Minister of Magic Amos Diggory stood in front of the crowd to explain a few more of the details. "As you may know, our Department of International Magical Cooperation has secured the assistance of several foreign Ministries to design interesting and appropriately challenging events for us. Three officials from the Ministry who sponsored the event will judge that event: cumulative scores across all the events, and all the participants, determine the winning school. The first task has been designed by the Egyptian Ministry of Magic. It is designed to test magical knowledge, cursebreaking skills, and sheer inventiveness and cunning." He turned to look at a disgruntled Goblet of Fire, which suddenly began to belch out names. "Ah, here we are. Harry Potter, Cedric Diggory, Alicia Spinnet, Bluto Pendergast..."

When Harry woke up the next morning, he was very nervous. He had dropped his name into the goblet for an unknown challenge. And now he was competing against seventh years in a contest that required 'cursebreaking skills,' of which Harry had almost none. He'd learned some diagnostic skills over the summer from Sirius so they could both examine the wards at Number Four and 12 Grimmauld – that, unfortunately, was the limit of his knowledge.

So, he prepared to go and make a fool out of himself.

He took the portkey at seven in the morning to the old World Cup Stadium. The ICW had decided to make some decent use of the facility. As Harry was a competitor, he walked straight inside, not even noticing the sophisticated scans that ensured he wasn't under Polyjuice, the Imperius Curse, or a half dozen other bewitchments.

Other people who were coming for the task – other students and adult witches and wizards from around the world – had to go through more strenuous security.

The security wizards from the ICW had, it seemed, compiled special lists of people to go through quite strenuous interrogations. Lucius Malfoy, for one, found his name was on that list when he showed up to watch the spectacle.

“Mr. Malfoy, you'll need to step into that room there for a security screening. We can't let you into the stadium without one...”

“Why, I never,” he scowled.

“Or you may leave and not attend the event. Your choice...”

“I will be lodging a complaint when I leave this place. Let's get this farce over with, you peasant.”

Lucius found, much to his everlasting surprise, that the ICW security wizards were extremely prepared to question him. They never said the phrase “Death Eater,” as Lucius had actually purchased a pardon and not legally claimed he was under the Imperius, but only old Bagnold knew that. No, the security wizards used veritaserum and got Lucius to admit to the use of Unforgivables on human beings, to bribery and corruption, and dozens of other crimes. He was stunned and carted away before he even regained the use of the slippery tongue. Just another one of the two dozen criminals swept up that day, Crabbe and Goyle, wizarding drug dealers, witches with second wands and no usage permits.

On the field, Harry enjoyed looking up into the stands. It wouldn't fill up by any means, but Harry could imagine that a few thousand

people would show up. And that none of them would yell louder than Sirius Black.

Harry looked at the small cubicles that had been erected on the field. There seemed to be sixty of them. He walked past them and saw an identical table and then what seemed like a magically held together pile of garbage on each one. Of course, the 'postmodern' sculpture was somehow the challenge. He stepped close toward one and then he could feel the magic embedded inside the thing.

This was the object they had to analyze and break, then.

Harry could see why this was a dangerous challenge. Cursebreakers had a ten percent mortality rate in their first year on the job. The rate for experienced ones was three or four points per year. And cursebreaking wasn't taught at any of the three schools... So, that meant there was something else to the challenge, a trick or a twist or a back door.

If this challenge was possible for anyone to complete, it was possible for Harry to do it, too. He just had to resist the temptation to do something completely obvious – like go attacking at the most heavily defended part of the sculpture. Harry felt somewhat glad he didn't even know any ward or curse breaking battering spells. He wouldn't even be tempted to try the brute approach.

He'd have to work out something different.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the first task of the TriSchool Tournament. Our sixty competitors are on the field now waiting for their final instructions. The object each one has in front of him or her was designed by the Egyptian Ministry of Magic. Each device had a small blue door on it. Behind the door is a charmed piece of leather. Touching that leather ends the challenge for a contestant and guarantees at least forty points from the judges, plus the leather item contains a critical clue for the next challenge. The rules: contestants may only apply magic to their devices and may not, under any circumstances, attempt to touch them. Contestants have one hour to retrieve the leather item. Partial points are awarded to any contestant who makes a reasonable attempt to complete the challenge. All

contestant areas are being recorded so that the judges can ensure proper credit. The performance area has been silenced so that the contestants will not be disturbed by the audience or anything they may shout out.

“Contestants, take a moment to breathe. And now we’ll begin. GO!”

Harry moved slowly and surely to his little cubicle. He couldn’t touch the enchanted object. But he could cast spells on it. So he did. He cast ward diagnostic charms at eight different parts of the sculpture. He carefully considered the information. The thing was cursed to electrocute any one interfering with the curses. It was warded against fire, explosions, locusts, and transfiguration. He cast the spell against the door. It was warded more strongly than anything else Harry had ever seen. It had all the standard ones, plus it was warded against vanishing, banishment, and a few dozen spells Harry couldn’t recognize at all. He considered what he’d learned before casting the diagnostic against the table. It wasn’t warded at all. Interesting.

Harry could cast on the table, then. He wondered if this was the trick. People would begin attacking the heavily fortified object and ignore its lowly pedestal.

He decided to begin some testing to see exactly what would happen if he worked on the table. “Wingardium Leviosa.”

The table floated into the air before Harry gently brought it back down. Nice. If he could float it, then he could vanish it. And then send a blast of wind at the warded sculpture to knock it on its side. Perhaps the bottom of the sculpture, the part that had rested against the table, was less well defended than the more visible parts.

So he levitated the table several feet in the air, vanished it, and quickly cast an air gusting charm at the sculpture. It wobbled in midair and crashed into the ground. A thin bottom plank of wood popped off the sculpture and then a piece of leather seemed to shoot out of the hollow bottom.

Harry's superb reflexes had the leather in his fist before it even had time to reach the ground.

Harry smiled. He'd been so worried. And the whole thing had been set up as more of a logic challenge than a cursebreakers' gauntlet. Thankfully. He wondered if anyone figured it out faster than he had. He decided to sit down inside his cubicle and wait for the end of the challenge. Until the judges revealed the scores, Harry didn't want to let anyone know how easy it had been for him to complete the task.

He looked at the piece of leather. He could already feel the charms on it wearing off. It had actually been charmed to fly off at a rapid speed if the sealed chamber had been opened. Clever – a final confusion for the contestants.

That had been a lot of fun. He turned the piece of leather over in his hands and saw the written clue: "Bring string."

He snorted. Could the clue have been any stranger?

He sat and thought for the rest of the hour. Harry decided he didn't much care about History or Astronomy or Potions...but that he did care very much about the wandless subjects. If anything, they weren't touching on the things Harry wanted to know and were progressing along rather slowly. Maybe it was time to pull a Hermione and hole up in the library...

Harry woke from his meditative slumber just as the judges began to address the audience.

"What a rousing challenge. We have seen some incredible feats of magical ability today, plus some even more incredible displays of cunning and logic. In first place, with a remarkable time of seven minutes eighteen seconds, and a full fifty points, Harry Potter, Hogwarts. In second place, with a time of thirty eight minutes twenty two seconds, and forty five points, Viktor Krum, Durmstrang. In third place, with a time of forty-nine minutes even, with forty two points, Cedric Diggory, Hogwarts. In fourth place, with a time of fifty eight minutes, eight seconds, and forty one points, Fleur Delacour, Beauxbatons..."

Harry was honestly shocked. The thing hadn't been that challenging. Merlin, it was designed with a fairly obvious flaw to exploit and an impossible-to-crack frontal approach. It should have been obvious to search out a weakness. How had it taken the other contestants so long to figure it out? From what Harry heard only eight of sixty contestants managed to get the leather within the hour time limit: three of them from Hogwarts (congratulations Angelina Johnson!). And the partial points being handed out started at ten points and went down rapidly from there.

Harry sat on the field as they replayed his entire effort for the crowd. He heard the murmurs of interest while this happened. The other contestants looked horrified at how easy the whole thing had been for Harry. More than one suggested he'd cheated...

"How? By using my brain? They announced it was about 'sheer inventiveness and cunning' last night. Did you try using any?"

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"Our next challenge has been created by the Greek Ministry of Magic. I think you'll all be quite amazed by what they've constructed," Amos Diggory said to the assembled Hogwarts crowd the night before the second task.

"The Greeks reminded me that they left a single clue inside the first task. I thank Harry, Cedric, and Angelina for sharing that clue with all of us. Otherwise, the Ministry officials said that this task is about bravery in the face of danger, calm thinking in the face of chaos, and logic and action melded into one." At grumbles over inscrutable clues, Minister Diggory raised his hand. "I know, I know. The Greeks were as oracular as their old Sybil the Soothsayer. And, there we are...the Goblet has selected Rodger Davies, Cedric Diggory, Cho Chang, Draco Malfoy, Fred Weasley..."

Harry thought it was fun, the next morning, to be in the stands watching the competition. Sirius was sitting next to him and was more excitable than a puppy.

“Ron still being an idiot?”

Harry just nodded. “He’s sitting over with the Hufflepuffs just to avoid me today. He was so damned jealous that I was picked for the first challenge – then even worse when I won it. Hermione has seemed to side with him. Their loss...”

Sirius jabbered on for a while trying to perk up Harry after blundering into a sensitive topic.

“I don’t know how your mind works, Harry, but what you did with the first challenge was incredible. They’ve been selling recordings just to demonstrate thinking under fire. It was brilliant...”

“Thanks, Sirius. You’ve said just that in your last five letters... Let’s see what the new one is all about.”

Sirius hugged him once again and then seemed to settle down a bit.

Suddenly a Greek-inflected accent filled the air. “Welcome to the second task. The Greek Ministry is proud to unveil this labyrinth in honor of the original. To speed up the challenge, we have created fifteen separate paths and fifteen entrances to be used simultaneously. Each contest will surrender his or her wand before entering...” Here the crowd and the field erupted into some shocks of surprise. Unarmed people going into a labyrinth? “...at the center of the labyrinth is a monster to be killed. Along the way are a number of magical traps and tricks and dead ends. A contestant receives full credit for bringing out the head of the monster within the one hour window. Contestants may only carry in the things they have on their persons now, save their wands. They may also find items of use and value inside the labyrinth if they look for them. The audience will be able to view any of the fifteen paths via magical screens. Good luck. The first flight of contestants may begin NOW!”

Harry and Sirius stared at the screens that suddenly appeared. Most of the contestants rocketed into the labyrinth while a few took a slower approach. Harry and Sirius watched while a few stopped inside the entrance to tie their strings to something. They had taken

the first clue literally: "Bring string." They would, at least, be able to easily retrace their steps from the maze.

Harry followed Fleur from Beauxbatons as she made her way, poorly, through the maze. Right turn. Left. Nope. Now, right. Now the middle of three forks. Nope. The right fork. Nope. Okay, left fork. Uh oh, magical trap to circumvent. She found her arms and legs stuck together. Sirius was dying laughing. Eventually she wriggled her way forward. Right again. Good! Then middle fork. Nope. Left fork. Apparent dead end. But Harry thought he saw the wall flickering a bit. Fleur left and tried all the options again. Harry wasn't the only one screaming for her to go back and test the wall. Eventually she leaned against it in frustration and fell through. She had to circumnavigate a dozen more twists and turns before she came to an open chamber. And then..."Holy Merlin, that's a Minotaur." A mostly human form but with a bull's head. And it charged at Fleur.

She screamed and dodged. It tried to gore her again with its sharpened horns. She threw herself on the ground. They went round and round. Fleur was bloody, dirty, and unable to inflict the slightest damage on the monster. Then it gored her good in her shoulder. As it moved in for the kill, it seemed to freeze up and three Greek wizards poured into the room to begin healing Fleur.

No one in the first flight managed to last past twenty-five minutes or kill their monster. When the second flight went in, Harry was thinking about what he'd seen rather than what was now happening.

"I think I see the trick in here."

"What, Harry? There's no trick. It's impossible to kill that thing... Thank Merlin it's just a construct of some sort and those wizards can immobilize it when they want. I'd hate for Minotaurs to roam the earth..."

"Having seen it once, I think I could kill it, Sirius."

"No offense, Harry, but you'd be unarmed. It's not possible."

“Right, just like it’s impossible to kill a sixty foot basilisk. No, I see the trick. It’s doable but not very easy...”

“Okay, so what is the trick?”

“You can’t kill it in the room at the end. You have to lure it back to the last magical trap. If you dodge it and it gets stuck in the trap, then you’ve basically won. It’s got a sword or a really long dagger on its belt. You have to use its own weapon against it, Sirius...”

Sirius sat, unblinking and stunned. It made perfect sense. It wasn’t easy, but it was doable. It required timing, and luck, and no small amount of skill.

“But it’s really hard to think rationally when under attack which makes this a great task, a very difficult challenge.”

After all sixty challengers had their opportunity, the judges announced what the entire audience already knew. No one managed to kill their Minotaur.

“With five slashes from a sharpened stone, the best performance, awarded twenty points, was from Cedric Diggory, Hogwarts...”

Sirius and Harry were getting up and preparing to leave the stadium when an unusual offer came over the broadcast system.

“Since we have sixty undamaged golem constructs, we’ll open the challenge up to any member of audience. The rule about leaving your wand behind still applies.”

So Harry and Sirius each found themselves entering the labyrinth a few minutes later. Harry had memorized the path and the traps he’d seen on the screen. He almost flew down the corridors. When he reached the final room, he stepped far enough inside to trigger the Minotaur and then flew out of the room with the massive construct behind him. He ran straight at a magic trap and only side stepped it at the last second. The Minotaur fell right into it. Harry pivoted, snatched the sword from the Minotaur’s belt, and used eight rather ungraceful attempts to bloodlessly hack off the construct’s head. He returned

outside, the head held high. Sirius walked out of his labyrinth a few minutes later, looking a bit worse for the wear, also with a head.

Harry and Sirius threw their heads to the ground and laughed. They were the only challengers to accomplish the task. The Greek Ministry officials looked very pleased to see that someone had finally pulled off such a difficult challenge. They had been aiming for very challenging, not impossible, after all.

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Harry officially became Ravenclaw-esque in the month between the second and third tasks. Ron refused to talk to Harry. Hermione was straddling the fence, only coming off it to lecture Harry about trying harder in Potions or Astronomy or History, the subjects he was intentionally failing.

Harry fled to the library or to the secret passage that had suffered a cave-in whenever the Gryffindors became too much. He was working his way through Transfiguration and Charms books at a rapid rate. He learned more good defensive techniques from them than from any DADA book he'd ever picked up. Harry could now summon books, stones, and other things to serve as shields – he was beginning to work on learning to do it silently.

Harry had to do something to keep his mind occupied. It wasn't like he was learning much in any classes save Charms and Herbology.

The fake Moody's replacement, in particular, was terrible. She was back in line with the first and second year teachers that Dumbledore had selected. This one had what she said was a heavy Estonian accent. She lectured for entire class periods and didn't answer questions as a policy. Not that anyone caught most of the lecture, as her accent was only outweighed by the rather monotone voice she shared in common with Binns the ghost. They might get to practice a new spell or two once per month. It was clearly inadequate instruction.

Remus had been an inspired and inspiring teacher. Was it really so hard to find qualified people like him? Or did Dumbledore have more

people's lives to ruin, making him too busy to find an adequate teacher?

Harry was already teaching himself the material from every class. Why not self teach DADA?

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The snow was thick outside the castle when all of Hogwarts gathered to hear about the third task. Minister Diggory looked more than a bit nervous.

“The German Ministry has prepared what sounds to be a most difficult task, ladies and gentlemen. They informed me that each challenger will face a trio of giants from Germany's famed Black Forest tomorrow. What they must do – or what restrictions they have upon themselves, I know not. They did, however, request that I mention the following information. It will only be possible for, at most, three contestants to achieve maximum points. And it is entirely possible that not every contestant will be able to compete tomorrow given the specific nature of the challenge. Cunning, stealth, and trickery are the orders of the day.”

The Great Hall was silent. Three giants? One champion? Yikes. More than a few people were feeling nervous about having entered their names into the Goblet.

Harry didn't hear his name called so he was quite interested to see what the task would be. He and Sirius took the portkey the next morning and wound up in a set of stands carved from rock. They were obviously in the mountains ringing Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. Interesting.

“Guten morgen, ladies and gentlemen. The German Ministry of Magic is pleased to present the third task in the TriSchool Tournament. The challenge is offered in two parts: contestants earn twenty points for getting from the entrance of the pass to the exit; they earn an additional ten points for each giant killed before the contestant reaches the end of the pass. Contestants may use their wands and their minds to complete the challenge. We have brought eleven

giants with us, so if they are all killed before all the contestants make it through the task, then some may not be able to compete.”

Sirius spoke up first. “This sounds almost worst than the labyrinth, Harry. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking the first one who tries killing a giant with his wand will get clubbed.”

“Huh?”

“The labyrinth challenge came from mythology. It seems like this one did, too. The Odyssey? Didn’t the protagonist have to escape from a cave full of giants or Cyclopes at one point?”

Sirius slowly nodded his head.

“If memory serves, that story had Odysseus tricking the giants and burning their eyes. But I’ve heard alternate versions of similar stories where the hero sets his captors to fighting with each other. That’s what the successful person will do here, I think...”

“He’ll get the giants to attack each other?”

Harry nodded.

The next few hours passed with a lot of shouting and heart-pounding suspense. More than a quarter of the contestants managed to cross the pass. Disillusionment charms, flying, floating, confounding charms, all of these and a lot more magic helped the contestants to travel safely through the pass. Three even managed to kill a giant – but none of them made it across the pass. The least injured one only spent a week in the Hospital Wing.

Harry was a bit ashamed of his fellow students’ performance here. No one managed to get one giant fighting with another. Did no one pay attention in CoMC class? Giants were easily angered and didn’t care who they fought. Once angered, they’d fight a basilisk if one was nearby. Logic and thinking weren’t their strengths. A disillusioned contestant could easily make a giant angry by breaking its club or

magically lobbing a boulder at its head or any of a dozen other ways. If one got a giant sufficiently riled up, it would do a lot of damage to the other two giants. And they would then move against each other.

Harry shook his head. Why could no one think? None of the Slytherins had even been cunning enough to give that a try – and there had been six entered into the event.

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Christmas with Sirius was a wonderful thing. McGonagall and Dumbledore had told Harry several times he was required to stay at school for the holiday because of the Yule Ball tradition. Harry didn't care; he positively loathed Hogwarts, even if he was having a somewhat amusing time because of the TriSchool Tournament. More important than any Yule Ball, Sirius wanted to spend the holidays with his godson. So Harry went to 12 Grimmauld without a second thought.

"The ICW finally released lists of who they captured at the third task. It was longer than the lists from the first and second tasks. Merlin. You'd think criminals would stay away from the third task after what happened to their brethren at the first two, right?"

"You're assuming they act rationally, Sirius. I mean, who would let dozens of former killers walk free because they paid bribes to various Ministry officials? Oh, that's right, the Ministry of Magic." Harry shook his head. He really didn't want to be a part of the British Wizarding World any longer than he had to. "Malfoy, Crabbe, Goyle, McNair, Rookwood, and a few others are finally behind bars. And Crouch Jr. was Kissed. I wouldn't wish that on anyone, well, maybe for Wormtail."

Sirius growled. There had been no sign of the foul little rodent since he escaped from Hogwarts six months earlier.

"You still want to spend the summer in France, Harry?"

"If you want to. I wouldn't want to put you out if you have other plans..."

Sirius shook his head. “No, it sounds better than this place. Maybe I can get a demolition crew to destroy the inside and rebuild in the shell.”

“Awesome.”

“Actually, that sounds like exactly what I want to do...”

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Harry received some terribly shameful glares when he returned to Hogwarts shortly before classes were to resume. The teachers were obviously ‘disappointed’ in him. Why? He had plans and they could go hang themselves thinking that guilt would work on him. That first night back, Minister Diggory was back to explain the next task. This time the school was being informed a full week in advance. Must be a heavy duty challenge.

“The Irish Ministry has created a rather unique sounding challenge. One of their potions adepts was working on experimental potions when she stumbled across a rather unusual concoction. It acts like a boggart, but instead of you being confronted with your worst fear, you become your worst fear. They’ve named it the Jekyll and Hyde Potion. It lasts for only an hour and it is theoretically possible for you to fight through the effects, like ridding yourself of the Imperius Curse. Each contestant will consume the Potion. Full points to anyone who manages to break the enchantment before thirty minutes have passed. Partial points beyond that.”

The Goblet churned and churned. Harry’s name came out this time, along with nineteen others. Harry shivered a bit. This one didn’t seem fun. Would Harry turn into a dementor? Into Voldemort? What would happen to him?

The week passed slowly. Harry couldn’t exactly get anyone to cast the Imperius Curse on him, so he attempted to read up on its effects. He found a book on mental fortitude and meditation. He began attempting some of the exercises. He found it rather soothing. He found some references to the Arte of Occlumency. Sounded

interesting; he'd have to look into it after all this TriSchool business was over.

Finally Saturday morning arrived and Harry was beyond nervous. He would be swallowing an experimental potion and then waging a mental battle with it. Not a great way to spend a weekend really... At least they had cast a warming charm over the whole floor of the World Cup Stadium.

He walked to a cubicle, familiar from the first task, and sat on a stool. He looked up and saw that they had brought in some fool or other to officiate. He looked like an overweight bee in Quidditch robes. Yellow and black robes. Ridiculous.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen. The Irish Ministry has asked me, Ludo Bagman, to announce this, the fourth task of the TriSchool Tournament. Today, we will man versus himself, a gritty battle of wills. Each of the contestants will take a potion to transform themselves into the very things they fear most. What will happen? What will they transform into? And who will be able to overcome their fears before time runs out?"

An auburn-haired witch presented Harry with a potion vial and told him to swallow it.

"Now, the contest has begun. The Malfoy heir seems to be...oh, he's turned into a clown, a Muggle clown, admittedly a scary looking one, but still a clown. No fewer than three contestants have turned into Hogwarts teachers, including one particularly stern looking Minerva McGonagall. Maybe that'll give her something to chew over if she had children that terrified. And Harry Potter...well, I've never seen something like it. He's turned into some kind of mist. Oh, by the way people in the stands are reacting, it's a dementor mist, like when they're breeding. The boy is afraid of only fear, what a wise thing. And then there's Andurus Bandicoot. He's turned into a massive slug. Viktor Krum has become...well, I'm not sure what it is. A burning book, perhaps? Does our Quidditch star have a secret passion for forbidden knowledge? And Citronelle Gascoine has become a...er, a fairy. Who in their right mind is afraid of fairies, I ask you..."

While Bagman prattled on, Harry felt the crushing fear of being surrounded on all sides by dementors. He saw Pettigrew escaping and running off to Voldemort. He saw his mother killed. He saw Dudley wailing on his skinny, undernourished body. He saw teachers ignore the blood on Harry's lip and face. He saw Quirrell give his body over to Voldemort. He saw a basilisk and a basilisk fang sticking out from his arm. He saw himself, crushed and bloody. He saw failure. Failure and weakness of every kind. He saw villainy of every type. He saw Dumbledore lying to him time and again. He saw McGonagall stick her head in the sand, as if she were an ostrich animagus. He saw Snape taunting, mocking, and being perfectly vile – while no one stopped him, while he had free reign. A little voice tried to stop the images: But Snape's in prison now. The images continued.

He saw fearful faces looking at him after Harry discovered he was a parselmouth. He saw Malfoy and his goons harassing some frightened first years. The voice came back: You're strong enough. Strong enough to stop all the bullies. There's enough happiness in you, enough good in you to end all of this. The images slowed.

Harry saw Voldemort. He saw Voldemort lift up a dark wand and shout the Killing Curse at his mother. But, this time, before it could hit, the image froze. It was replaced by an earlier memory – one Harry had never seen before – of Harry in his mother's arms listening to a story Lily read to him.

That is the truth. The fear you can put away so you can see the truth, Harry. Destroy the fear; banish it; never let it creep into your body again. It has no place here, there's no room in your mind for it, no need.

Harry seemed more aware of himself suddenly. He realized what he needed to do to get out of his situation. He wondered if the magic would respond. "Expecto Patronum," he shouted inside his black shroud of fear.

"...and it's quite amusing to see the oversized wolverine attacking that 'fearsome' Muggle clown. And... Sweet Merlin, what's going on with Potter's mist? A tremendous white light seemed to crack up the center of the mist. Now, rays of it are pouring forth. Now there's...is

that a stag? What a rack of antlers on that thing! It's a Patronus, I'm sure of it. Harry Potter has managed to cast the Patronus Charm while trapped in his dementor mist. And that said mist seems to be clearing up...and Harry Potter is now visible. Remarkable, ladies and gentlemen. The most challenging of all possible fears has been overcome by Mr. Potter in twenty-six minutes. He's the first one to overcome the effects of the potion. Outstanding work, Mr. Potter."

Harry accepted a bar of chocolate and ate it quietly. But he didn't feel the usual chill or shakes from the Dementors. Had that crazy stunt finally helped cure him of his problems? It was possible, although Harry didn't intend to find out by visiting any Dementors in the near future.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry only got an interrogation from Hermione about what happened in that event. She never asked him how he felt.

"Tell me how you did that."

Over the course of a night in Gryffindor Tower, she must have said the phrase a dozen times. Could she not sense when she annoyed people? Was she really that blind, that socially inept?

Or did she just not care. Harry, after all, had let her get away with her favorite tricks for several years now. It seemed Hermione was just unwilling to recognize that the rules had changed.

"Hermione," Harry finally said. "It's been a very long day. I don't particularly care to relive all the unpleasant things that happened. Maybe we can talk about it later..."

"But I want to know."

"Hermione, I'm glad you're so curious. But I'm tired. Good night." That was as polite as Harry could pull off at the present moment.

"Harry, that's not fair."

He didn't say anything else to her as he walked up the stairs. Fair. What did Hermione know about fair?

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The fifth challenge, presented by the Spanish Ministry, should have been massively entertaining. There was a dragon guarding a chest buried inside a mound of leprechaun gold. The instructions to the competitors were: "get the chest and its contents as they'll be needed for the sixth challenge." Competitors were instructed not to harm the dragon, as it was particularly resistant to magic of all kinds.

What could be better than this? A fierce dragon. Competitors sneaking around trying to get at a chest. Harry began analyzing the situation. Dragons were sensitive to smell, to movement, to sound – but couldn't see all that well. They could sense movement, but not what moved with any degree of accuracy. Hence it's main weapons of tail, claws, and fire – none of them needed to be terribly accurate to do a lot of damage.

Harry sat arguing with Sirius for a few minutes about how to approach the situation when the problem happened.

Simply put, the problem, from Harry's perspective, was that he was kidnapped from the stands by a rat that suddenly transformed into a human. The ICW had been checking every person entering the World Cup Stadium, but they hadn't erected anti-animagus wards. Peter Pettigrew grabbed Harry with one hand and fumbled for a moment getting out a portkey. Sirius had just enough time to get off a quick, ghastly spell.

"Ghass!" A greenish-brown bolt of energy impacted with Pettigrew's arm just as the portkey activated. Blood fell to the ground in front of Sirius even while Harry and the rat were gone.

When Harry thumped into the ground in what seemed a cemetery, Pettigrew's arm fell off and he collapsed to the ground in shock from the portkey travel combined with the rapid blood loss he was experiencing.

Harry stood up and surveyed the landscape. Definitely a cemetery. He spied something moving in the distance. Something small. He disillusioned himself and began walking toward the creature.

“Harry Potter,” the disgusting sound made Harry wince. “I know my servant brought you to me. Show yourself, boy, so we can get started.”

The creature was Voldemort. But he wasn't in a real body. He appeared more like an oversized slug or a very lumpy sort of baby. He was dragging himself across the lawn toward where Pettigrew lay dying. He was going for the dark wand Pettigrew had carried.

Harry quickly pulled out his own wand and summoned the vile wand that had killed his parents.

“Potter. Don't act the hero. I will have my will done today. I will have a new body. Your blood, my Muggle father's bones, and the whole of this disgusting rat – yes, quite a fine new body.”

A ritual then. A vile ritual. Harry saw a bubbling cauldron near to an odd looking tomb. What would happen from an incomplete ritual? Would it kill Voldemort again? Would it do something worse than kill him? Or would it give him a new body of some sort?

Harry walked silently to the cauldron. It was filled with a rapidly boiling white concoction. Harry decided to spoil this cauldron – Snape had accused him of doing exactly that numerous times. Harry quietly hefted dirt into the cauldron and then some grass. He looked into the open grave to the side of the cauldron. There were human bones in there along with smaller ones. Rodent, perhaps? Harry reached in and pulled out the tiny bones. They went into the cauldron, too. Now the boiling white liquid turned a disgusting shade of green. Harry looked around for other things he could use to spoil the potion.

He found moss on a grave, some moldy paper and brittle flowers left on another, and some muggle coins on a third. All of them went into the cauldron. The liquid turned a violent orange.

Before he performed his final step, Harry thought long and hard. Rituals were intensely difficult, from the little he'd read in his Potions texts over the years. They required precision. Any foul up in the Potion or the ritual itself would cause a devastating failure.

So, Harry drew out his wand and cast again. "Accio Voldemort."

He released the spell just as the disgusting slug baby was over the top of the cauldron. Voldemort fell with a horrified scream straight into the cauldron. Then Harry did two more things.

"Foul beast, I order you back whence you came." It seemed the right thing to say in an exorcism or a banishment ritual. Then he cast "Colloportus" on the top of the cauldron.

Harry hoped it drowned. He hoped the spirit was never able to leave the cauldron.

He stumbled back toward the dead Pettigrew and grasped at the portkey. Harry and Pettigrew's body disappeared from the cemetery. He reappeared right in front of a frantic, screaming Sirius Black.

"Sirius. Sirius! It's okay. I'm okay. Nothing bad happened, okay."

Then Harry had to fend off an attack by an upset, overanxious godfather. Harry and Sirius – along with the body of Pettigrew – were rushed out of the stadium. The ICW guards wouldn't even let Dumbledore into where Harry was resting and then telling his tale.

The ICW guards eventually tracked down the destination of that portkey. They found some kind of revolting ritual site, just as Harry had described. But instead of a liquid inside the cauldron, they found a solid substance, fleshy, warm to the touch, a heart beat even. That disgusting flesh perfectly filled the entirety of the cauldron. It seemed alive somehow, but it didn't register as exactly human. It had no mouth. Because Harry had kept the word "Voldemort" out of his story – just explaining that Pettigrew had intended to use Harry in some kind of ritual, which Harry spoiled after Pettigrew died – no one ever knew what it was. Flesh that couldn't die, couldn't move, couldn't

speak, couldn't eat, couldn't access magic. It was immortal and yet perfectly useless.

The Department of Mysteries would end up devoting three hundred years worth of study to the disgusting lump molded inside the cauldron. They would never come to any firm conclusions, other than that the thing should only be examined in a well ventilated space as it was quite foul-smelling.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Even with all the confusion going on with Harry, Sirius, and Pettigrew, the ICW managed to complete the running of the fifth task. Seven people managed to get the chest, four from Durmstrang (one was Viktor Krum), one from Beauxbatons, and two from Hogwarts (Cedric Diggory and Hellebore Winterbottom, a rather frosty seventh-year Slytherin).

After the fifth task, Hogwarts was in second place overall, even though Cedric Diggory, Harry Potter, and Rodger Davies held the top three individual spots. (Krum was fourth.) Davies, Diggory, and Krum had all competed in three events – only Harry had one more shot. So it was still possible for a good deal of change to still happen with the individual standings.

When the morning came to announce the sixth challenge taking place that very evening, Harry was curious and nervous. He'd seen the bizarre book inside the dragon's chest. It was all about bronze keys. Crazy judges and event designers.

Books and keys. Hmm.

"Gather round. Gather round, right?" Minister Diggory always sounded like he was herding small children. "The sixth task, well, I have no idea what to make of it. I think the postmodernists in the Italian Ministry just went nuts. Still, I owe all of you something of an explanation. At nine o'clock tonight the competitors will be locked into a special magical library that's been constructed on the grounds of the World Cup Stadium. They will have one hour to locate the single bronze key located in the library. There will be thousands of other

keys, amethyst keys, onyx keys, silver, gold, steel, and ruby. Some will be in books; some in plain sight; some will be hidden behind bookshelves or under the stone flooring. But only the bronze key will open the door. There will be hundreds of clues written on the walls, as well, the Italians inform me. Once one key is discovered, another will be magically hidden in the library. The first one out gets full points; the second one forty-five; the third gets forty; and so on. There's nothing dangerous inside, they assure me, aside from the possibility of losing your mind in the puzzle."

Harry didn't care for this challenge. It sounded like something Hermione would love. He wasn't shocked when her name came out of the Goblet, but he was surprised when his did.

He spent the rest of the day ignoring his acquaintances. He spent it considering the little information he had. It sounded impossible. Thousands of keys inside a magically expanded library with an almost infinite number of hiding spots and all sixty competitors searching at the same time. It couldn't be done. But they'd been given a short, fixed amount of time to do it in. Therefore the event creators seemed to be suggesting that it was possible. There would have to be a trick involved, like in so many of the other events. Harry couldn't shake the feeling that he'd heard something about this story before, or something like it.

Harry devised a set of rules to follow...and as he was reviewing his rules a few minutes before the event started, he realized what the real event was. The library was what was known as a liar's lock. It was an old form of deception, a con game. A man would come across some wounded person. The wounded man would be clutching the spoils of a battle, but he'd be missing something needed to open the chest or casket or container. He'd politely offer to share the spoils with the newcomer, if the newcomer would kindly walk three miles back and look for the bronze key he'd dropped or that was on someone's corpse in the battlefield or that was in some other inconvenient place. So the dupe would leave his own belongings and trundle off to search for a bronze key. Eventually he'd find it and return to discover that his own belongings, the wounded man, and the man's chest were all gone. And all he had left was a bronze key to show for it. Less than worthless.

Harry smiled. He finally got the allusion. He had a decent idea of how to compete in the challenge. In fact, his set of rules changed a bit after he decided that he was facing a liar's lock.

--Something will attempt to lead you away from where the real key is. Sleight of hand is essential here. Don't fall for it.

--One or more of the rules are lies. One or more is absolutely the truth. The door I need to open will actually be locked, but it will be far easier to open than what they're telling me.

--Trust nothing. Nothing will be as it seems.

After the official rules were repeated for the spectators, Harry opened his door to the library. He closed it behind him and the door locked. Just to be sure, he attempted to open it. It was quite locked. Check.

He looked around the area he was in. It was poorly lit, except for the lights splashed on the walls that held various clues. He saw there was an onyx key on a nail right next to the door he'd just entered. He plucked a book off the shelf and saw another key glittering on a nail at the back of the bookshelf. Harry opened the book. It was filled with images of different bronze keys.

Harry looked up and began to read the clues. He heard other people in the distance. Obviously all the corridors in the library were connected together. If Harry figured out the trick, he'd have to be careful not to give it away.

One clue painted high on the wall said, "The green books hold nothing for you, but the red corridors ahead spell victory."

Another said, "Do not be tempted by the keys you can see. Victory comes with the undiscovered key."

A third said, "There are sixty one corridors in this library. The one without a contestant is the one you're seeking."

Harry stopped moving then. He read the next few clues without moving toward them. All the clues were leading Harry into the library proper. And away from this corridor and the door he'd need to be able to leave. Every single clue, without exception. This was part of the lie, then.

He plucked another book off the shelf. It too held only images of bronze keys.

And a third. And a fourth.

Harry smiled. The need for a bronze key was the major lie. Because this wasn't a con job – because the door would really open to a sort of treasure – the only key that wouldn't work was a bronze key. The library was filled with thousands of keys, keys that the contestants ignored because they weren't bronze. Everywhere the contestants turned the valid keys stared them in the face, but the contestants rejected them because of the initial lie. It was a good challenge. Harry waited until he was sure he was alone in his corridor. Then he silently moved back to the doorway and plucked the onyx key off the wall.

He touched the key to the door. The door popped open and Harry stepped out. He brought the onyx key with him as a souvenir. He shut the door behind him and smiled.

What a mind bending puzzle. It was simple now that he was done. But set in an elaborate environment, layered with fake rules, harnessed to a brief time limit, and then run at the same time for all sixty competitors, it had been enough to keep the truth murky. Adrenaline and fear could always obscure the truth.

Italian Ministry workers came over to congratulate Harry and to ask how he'd completed it so quickly.

"I've had every lie, cheat, or scheme tried on me at some time. It took me a while, gentlemen, but I remembered the liar's lock..."

The Italians looked impressed and not a touch angry.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Albus Dumbledore sat in his office waiting for Harry to show up. Dumbledore had been sure that Harry had received it this morning at breakfast. But the boy was already twenty minutes late. And this was the fourth meeting that Harry hadn't bothered to turn up at. Dumbledore needed to address the boy's grades with him.

Harry Potter was in very strong danger of failing out of Hogwarts. A ridiculous notion, but true none the less.

Dumbledore had sat with each of the concerned teachers. Binns said Harry didn't come for classes, tests, and didn't turn in papers. Sinistra said the boy showed for classes but didn't turn in any essays and barely exerted himself on tests. The things Snape had said for years couldn't be repeated in mixed company, period. The new Potions professor, McCordle, couldn't figure out Harry. He brewed perfectly well, but would usually toss in something to ruin the potion at the last second. And he never turned in any homework. He was mysteriously absent on test days, too.

Why was Harry doing so poorly in those classes when he was excelling so wonderfully in the Tournament and in all of his other classes. He had high 'E's or 'O's in everything else. What was the boy thinking? Didn't he know that he was likely not to be invited back to the best school of witchcraft and wizardry in the world?

And, on another issue, Mr. Filch reported that Harry never showed up for any assigned detentions. And Mr. Filch could never seem to spot the little hellion either.

Dumbledore sighed and shoved another lemon drop in his mouth. The boy would apparently have to learn the hard way. Dumbledore wouldn't always be around to bail him out.

If Harry failed, then he failed. Let Harry come crying. Yes, that was the right approach. He'd realize over the summer once he got his denial letter that he had to do better. Oh yes.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry, obviously, made the team of five for the final challenge. He was the only competitor from the three schools to achieve a perfect score – one hundred fifty points – and had been named the Overall Individual Champion. Hogwarts as a school was just barely behind Durmstrang now. It would all come down to what they were calling The Quest.

An old gentleman stepped up to the podium. “Ladies and gentlemen, I am Mr. Yerner Cracklepot, this year’s elected head of the International Confederation of Warlocks. I welcome you the grounds of Hogwarts for our final competition in this TriSchool Tournament. The teams of five were selected by each school one week ago. They were given only basic instructions on what would be happening during this event designed by the Swiss Ministry of Magic. It is, simply, a quest. Each team must follow the instructions they receive and retrieve their Quest Object. Each school has different clues to follow, of course. They may all well face the same challenges, but in a different order from each other. The winning team will receive two hundred fifty points for its school. The two runners up receive nothing. It’s do or die; all or nothing, ladies and gentlemen.”

The Hogwarts Team was Harry and four seventh years Harry didn’t know well. The only one who spoke to Harry much at all was Cedric Diggory. He was glad this was the last task – they’d certainly been fun to watch and participate in – but he couldn’t care if Hogwarts actually won. There were only four weeks until the summer break. Then Harry would be done with Hogwarts for good. He made it a point to fail History, Potions, and Astronomy. It hadn’t been hard to do for Potions, but Sinistra kept trying to ‘give him the benefit of the doubt.’ Harry figured it was Dumbledore’s interference at play. That was when Harry stopped taking tests altogether in her class. On the other hand, of course, he had ‘O’s going in his other subjects, including Runes and CoMC. Three failing grades would be enough to ensure he wasn’t invited to return for his fifth year. Not even the Board of Governors could change that rule after the fact.

Perfect.

McGonagall had been alternating between counseling him and yelling at him. “I can’t understand for the life of you why this is happening, Mr.

Potter. You're the top student in at least three subjects and at the very bottom in three. Why don't you do your Potions homework? Or show up to History? Professor Sinistra doesn't know what to do with you...And Professor Dumbledore has invited you to four meetings to discuss your abominable conduct this year. He tells me you haven't gone to any of them or any of your assigned detentions."

Flitwick has caught on to what Harry was doing. He privately congratulated the boy and mentioned that he would have been happier in Ravenclaw. (At that, Harry had to agree. Gryffindor just encouraged half-cocked plans and a lack of forethought.) He and Harry discussed Harry's plans for private tutoring. Professor Flitwick recommended a few people he knew in the business. Harry had always liked his diminutive Professor – and his conduct then just proved to him again why that was.

Hagrid continued inviting Harry over for tea and rock cakes. They never talked academics. It was always about Hagrid's creatures, such as the wounded Pegasus he was tending to, or how Harry's pickup games in Quidditch were going or other light, interesting filler. Harry would always be grateful to Hagrid for plucking him from the Dursleys on his eleventh birthday – and also resentful that Hagrid had originally prevented Sirius from taking custody of him all those years ago. It was a difficult relationship to manage, from Harry's viewpoint at least.

Dumbledore, though, was a different matter. There was nothing complicated about that. After Harry learned of Sirius's innocence and of Dumbledore's role in not getting Sirius a trial all those years ago, Harry refused to talk or even look at the man. He certainly wouldn't voluntarily walk into the man's office and be counseled by him. Instead, he just compiled a longer and longer list of things he'd never talk to Dumbledore about. He knew that the old man would never have satisfactory answers to share. It'd be the equivalent of asking a serial killer why he'd killed someone's daughter. The answer would never do, no matter how heart felt or how sincere (and Harry doubted Dumbledore could pull off either one) – the damage was done and irreversible. Dumbledore wasn't exactly a serial killer. He was worse: he robbed children of their childhoods, the innocent of their freedom, and the complacent of their lives. People believed so much in

Dumbledore, they stopped believing in themselves and wouldn't even fight back during the first war with Voldemort. Dumbledore had allowed people to rely on him for so long because it made him feel good, now a few people were beginning to see the true cost of that decision making. It was staggering how many lives Dumbledore had a hand in ruining.

Harry saw his 'friends' sitting in one of the stands. They were just as bad, in their own ways. Harry spoke with Hermione and Ron less than a dozen times a week now. Harry had finally realized that his desperation for a normal life had led him to make ridiculous compromises. Hermione's take-charge attitude, and insistence on being right, rubbed everyone the wrong way; Harry had just bit down his objections for the past few years to ensure the peace. Really, Ron and Hermione fought too much as it was. Plus, Harry had finally seen some of Hermione's graded essays. She proclaimed herself a genius, but the essays were 'A' or 'EE' work. She wasn't the second coming of Merlin, as she seemed to indicate. She was, however, a gifted self promoter in the vein of Gilderoy Lockhart. After all, she certainly had liked the foppish wizard in their second year.

Ron's jealousy overwhelmed any of his positive characteristics. He'd turned on Harry a few times over the years, mostly for minor issues, but he really melted down this year. The worst of it had come after Harry had been selected by the Goblet of Fire for a third event. "Why do you get everything?" Ron had stated the question two dozen different ways, but that's what he meant. Ron himself had been lucky to get to participate in a single event. Not many fourth years got even one. But Ron didn't see anything except 'Harry's fame' getting him everything he wanted.

"Really, Ron, how does one bedazzle an enchanted cup with his fame? Tell me that." Ron, predictably, hadn't had an answer to that. Nor had he been angry that George got to participate in two events and Fred in one. Or Hermione in two. No, his anger was focused on Harry.

Ginny Weasley became impossible to deal with. Half the time she seemed to moon over Harry; the other half of the time she spent securing little boyfriends for herself. Poor Neville, she'd led him on for

a good two months after the Yule Ball they'd attended together. She really had learned viciousness and cruelty from her older brother Percy. Harry didn't even care to spend time in the same common room as her. She used people in vile ways and was totally transparent when she was trying to be sneaky.

Neville, he would miss Neville. The boy was smarter than people thought; braver than he thought himself; and very loyal to those who seemed to deserve it. Maybe Harry should have wised up years earlier to the reasons Neville didn't care much for Hermione or Ron. Smart guy.

Harry realized he'd been zoning out. He started paying attention to the old man at the podium. He'd never heard the man's name before, his speech pattern seemed a bit off, and overall there was just something wrong about him.

"There is no time limit tonight. The first one to capture the Object wins. In one minute, every team may open their first envelope. It contains a clue to the first obstacle they must overcome."

Harry looked down at the envelope that had just appeared in his hand. As interested as he should be in the envelope, he was still considering that crazy old man Cracklepot. There was something there, something important.

Cedric snatched the envelope from Harry's hand since Harry seemed preoccupied. Harry frowned but didn't protest. He'd kicked the asses of everyone on the team and they resented it. Harry had at least managed to be friendly with the Eastern Europeans and the French. The Hogwarts contingent was stuck back in the mode of considering Harry an 'attention seeker.' Harry knew that Ron and Hermione had had more than a little bit to do with encouraging this gossip. Hermione had even been quoted in one of those vile Rita Skeeter articles.

The cannon sounded and Cedric set to ripping open the envelope. The French started running off toward the Owlery. The Durmstrang crew headed into Hogwarts and seemed to be heading for the dungeons. Harry realized that knowing where the opponents were

and had been was almost as important as following one's own clues. The final object wouldn't be in a place where they had all gone before, Harry knew that much. It'd also have to be out in plain view of the audience allowing for a possibly dramatic finish between two or more of the teams. Thus, neither the Owlery nor Hogwarts' dungeons held the object.

"Inside the Forbidden Forest, there's a clearing..."

"I know of two," Harry said. "Does the clue give you any more detail?"

"No, just a clearing..."

Great, Harry thought. It's either wrestling with centaurs or killing off acromantulas. Harry shivered a bit.

"Let's start with the closer one," Harry said.

They ran into the Forest and arrived at a surprisingly full clearing. Centaurs. Armed centaurs, bows out and strung for combat. Firenze hadn't been so bad in first year, but the others Harry had come across seemed continually cold and angry. This particular group seemed rather warlike.

"Honored centaurs, teach us what we need to know in order to pass from your lands," Harry said. Hagrid had taught proper methods for addressing centaurs in last year's CoMC class.

"Youngling, there is a challenge you and yours must face before we can assist you."

Great, Harry thought. Centaur torment.

The great beast then proceeded to reel off a half dozen riddles about the planets and their alignments. The answers to the riddles would tell them who possessed the clue to their next destination.

"Worse than Sphinxes," Harry muttered. The only redeeming feature was that Cedric and one other were taking Astronomy NEWTs. Still, they spent twenty minutes going round and round debating the clues.

Finally Harry had enough. "It's gotta be the blond one in the second row," Harry said while the other were continuing to disagree about astronomy details.

"What? How do you know," Cedric asked.

"He keeps fidgeting, like he's nervous. I may not know the stars, boys, but I can read people. Even centaurs."

It took the others five more minutes – wasted minutes, Harry knew – to come to the same conclusion based on the riddles. From there it was off to a small marble pedestal that stood on the shore of the Black Lake.

"Nine Islands of Sin. Three of the Pure Faith. Sin brings pain and danger. Purity brings you closer to the clue. Collect the three boxes of purity for the proper direction..."

"Ah, no," Harry said. "Centaur rubbish, now this is from the merpeople. They want us to travel around to these islands and then we'll be stuck diving down to the bottom of the lake to chat with them, I know it."

Cedric and the other looked severely peeved at how quickly Harry was piecing things together. But Cedric still wouldn't cede leadership of the group. He was three years older after all. He knew better than the 'Boy-Who-Lived.'

It was Harry who got them started on their quest in the lake. He conjured an apple. "It's about the only thing I can conjure now. Any of you able to turn this into a boat?"

They'd gotten so embroiled in the details of which islands to search that none of them had thought about their lack of a sailing vessel.

An hour later, all of them had been lanced, bitten, burned, or otherwise felt the sting of pain. They finally had all three of the Hogwarts boxes. "It's just going to tell us to dive to the bottom, boys. Hop to it."

Cedric growled. He hoped to Merlin it wasn't exactly what Harry just said.

"Come seek us where our voices sound. We have something you'll dearly want."

Cedric was ready to scream. They'd just wasted an hour searching for these clues when Harry had been right the entire time.

Cedric brandished his wand and applied a Bubble-Head to Harry and then himself. He grabbed the smaller boy and threw him in the water. Then he jumped in behind him. Harry didn't bother swearing about being cold or about his clothes being wet. He was swimming straight down to the mer village.

He brandished the note, the merpeople laughed at it, then handed over the next clue. For the rest of the challenge, Harry refused to speak to them. Oh, he ran with them to the Owlery, where the clue pointed, but didn't warn them about what they were likely to find inside or that they could have just flown up the outside of the building with a Levitation Charm. Nor did he even follow behind them when they were told to go to the Hogwarts dungeons and brave a gauntlet of deadly potions and other enchantments.

Harry just left them to it. He saw the French were in the Forest. Durmstrang was on the water.

Interesting. The staging areas were all used it seemed, just the four areas. All of them had the contestants orbiting around this main seating area and the awards stage. Harry smiled. For all the stupid centaurs, and laughing merpeople, and those horrifying creatures in the Owlery, this was the place. The object was in front of him – all of everyone – the entire time. It...it even spoke to everyone gathered here.

Cracklepot, my arse, Harry thought.

He walked up to the podium as the Durmstrang crew made their way to another island – and caused another Blast-Ended Skrewt to attack – on the Black Lake.

Harry pointed his wand at ‘Mr. Yerner Cracklepot’ and said “Finite Incantatem.”

The illusion fell away. In the man’s absence was, in fact, a cracked pot. Harry snatched it before it could crash on the stage’s wooden slats. He’d just won the TriSchool Tournament and none of his teammates were here. How would that make them look? Harry kept the satisfaction at bay. They’d been trained by Dumbledore to be average, to be morons. Harry really couldn’t expect better out of them. Could he?

Durmstrang made it back to the shore looking for their “cracked pot” long before the rest of the Hogwarts crew emerged from the dungeons, looking considerably worse for the wear. They were scowling something fierce – and they only got worse once they realized that Harry had single handedly won the Tournament for Hogwarts an hour and a half earlier. All of their recent pain was for naught.

Harry’s only comment after the photographs: “Boys, you need to learn to listen. You’re not always the smartest people in the room, alright.”

It was too much, Harry knew, to ask them to actually think. Harry had been puzzling over that Cracklepot person ever since the illusion had said his name. If Harry hadn’t have been distracted by his teammate’s idiocy, the whole final event would have been over in less than an hour. Harry knew better from the very beginning than to go into the Owlery or the dungeons. It was only the Forest and the Lake they had to bother with before Harry would have realized how small a “Questing” area it really was.

The first rule of questing had applied here, even if Harry only recognized it belatedly. He realized that the ending of a quest, almost by definition, had to be at the same place as the beginning of the quest.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry had given his formal letter of withdrawal to his Head of House before the final breakfast he'd ever have at Hogwarts. It was a huge black eye to the school. Harry had purposefully failed three classes, beaten decades old records for top performance in four others, gotten a solid 'O' in the other, and been named the Overall Individual Champion of the TriSchool Tournament – as a fourth-year student. He was making Hogwarts look bad, McGonagall shouted at him time and again.

“No, ma'am, you're all handling that fine by yourselves. You don't need my help to do that...”

She was about to assign detention, but realized he'd never complete it.

“Go.”

“No, let me tell you a couple of things, first. You don't listen well. Not to students at least: in my first year, you ignored warnings about the lax safety of the Philosopher's Stone. I have no idea whether you were in on Dumbledore's plans to train me up using little exercises like that, but I do know that you don't listen. You think you know everything. You think Dumbledore knows right from wrong. You are a fine teacher, ma'am, and I've learned a lot from you, but you interact poorly with people. You don't bully them the same way Snape did, but it has a similar effect. I'd suggest you retire and leave these stressful duties to someone younger and with a more even temperament. Take Dumbledore with you when you go. He should have been dispatched decades ago. I suspect he has full-blown dementia, to be honest. But, you won't bother to check. You'll just ignore me again, like you've always done. Have a great life, Professor. I don't expect I'll ever see you again.”

Harry walked out of her room while she was still trying to assimilate her very thorough telling off. He walked down to the Great Hall. It really was a fascinating room.

Harry put fruit and a small pile of eggs on his plate. He spent most of the meal chatting with Neville about plants. Neville was excited to return home for the summer. He missed working in his own greenhouse.

Dumbledore tried using his 'sad paternal' stare at Harry during the meal. Harry didn't spare the man a moment's thought. Harry would turn up for the man's funeral in time, but only to ensure he was actually dead. Harry's upbringing had taught him kindness and compassion for those weaker than him (he loathed bullies), but also unyielding will and firmness and contempt in the face of lies, deceptions, and cruelty. It made him harder than any fourteen-year-old should be...but Dumbledore got what he paid for.

Harry skipped the train ride back by taking the thestral-drawn carriages to Hogsmeade and then portkeying home. Black Manor looked completely different inside. The demolition team had finished up months ago and now the finishing squad was putting on the last touches.

It was a marvel of a house. It would be Harry's home for at least the next three years. Harry was looking forward to it.

"Sirius, it's wonderful."

"I'm glad you like it, pup. It'll be finished in a few weeks, really and truly finished. I had an agent find us a place to use in Paris until then. Call it a reward, of sorts. Dumbledore's written more letters about you, not to mention what McGonagall's sent along, than I ever earned in my days as a Marauder. It was truly inspired using their own rules against them once you decided you weren't going back..."

"One can break rules for fun, or for profit. One can also use and follow rules for fun, or for profit. I mix and match to keep people guessing."

Sirius laughed for a solid minute.

“That you do, Harry. That you do. That said, I expect you to get an OWL in Potions, Astronomy, and History. I’m going to be a worst taskmaster than you’ve ever encountered, Harry...”

Harry laughed now. “Don’t worry, Sirius. I read the history book, I know the stars, and I finally got around to teaching myself potions since Snape never bothered.”

It was the start of a better life.

The Second Tournament

A/N: Harry didn't really have to fight with a fully grown Dark Lord in the first installment, so I decided to add a bit more onto this story. Enjoy! (Also includes my homages to the mystery/thriller genre and some of my favorite action film motifs: the heist scene and the 'botched ambush,' usually popular in spy movies.)

Here's the Second Tournament, set three years after the first one. Seven new tasks to enjoy. And an actual plotline. More Smart!Observant!Harry with hints of darkness.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter loved his life. Currently, he was relaxing at a breakfast table in Trieste. He had nearly two more months to travel and study with his godfather before Sirius had to return to work and Harry head off to school. For the last three weeks, they had been studying with the top warding expert in Italy, a short wizard with more hair coming out of his ears and nose than resided on his head. But Olivetti had a brilliant mind.

The wizard had developed warding techniques – and schemes, but those he shared with no one, every warder worth his salt developed his own schemes – that put the Gringotts goblins to shame. Given his background, Harry was very interested in security of all kinds. Harry was a very diligent student, after all: he'd been learning from tutors and experts for the last three years. These people didn't bother with mollycoddling – they explained what they knew, collected their fees, and left. It was up to Harry to understand, to practice, to learn. It was his money and his life wasted if he didn't.

Harry slugged back the small cup of bitter coffee he'd ordered with breakfast. His body seemed to jolt into life with the warmth and caffeine now flowing through him. He'd enjoyed this summer with Sirius.

He'd enjoyed all of his time with Sirius – that summer after his last year at Hogwarts, they'd spent most of that in France, a bit in Paris but more roaming around the rest of the countryside. They'd taken

last summer to explore the United States of America, stopping by various learning opportunities along the way. Who knew they had so many good dueling instructors in America? Harry had studied briefly with three of them. He'd quickly learned their individual styles and incorporated parts of their teachings into his own style. And, now, this summer was a kind of grand tour of Europe. Nonmagical sites and museums, magical teachers for various special topics. Harry was attending a Muggle University soon, but he wasn't going to become soft in his magical knowledge or skills.

Next stop was Rome and a week of food, touring, and visitations to the Vatican's Special Library of Antiquities.

Sirius stumbled out into the kitchen of their rented villa half an hour later. Harry was deeply engrossed in a handwritten book he'd copied (with permission) from his teacher, Olivetti. The volume was probably illegal to possess as it was a thorough breakdown of every ward and weakness that Gringotts Bank possessed. It was practically a manual for breaking into the place without detection and without significant risk. Harry considered everything he read and marveled as how simplistic the actual goblin protections actually were. Their biggest protection, it seemed, was simple fear. People feared goblins, feared the rumors over their sort of magic, feared the thousand years of established goblin reputation, and left it at that. Looking at the book, most witches and wizards would have been better off burying their treasures in their backyards. At least that held a measure of secrecy. If a determined, skilled wizard wanted to break into Gringotts, it wouldn't be hard. That half-wit Quirrell had done it before Harry's first year at Hogwarts; he'd only had Voldemort's spirit to coach him in the exercise.

"Morning, pup."

"Pup? Sirius, drink your coffee. Maybe you'll remember I'm taller than you are now. Nutrient potions are my friend."

"Don't remind me, kiddo. You may be fully grown, but I can still toast your ass in a prank war."

“Very true, Sirius. Your mind is so damn illogical I can’t figure out half the things you think up.”

Sirius laughed at the backhanded compliment.

“Last day with Olivetti. What do you think he’s cooked up,” Sirius asked after he finally had some caffeine inside him.

Harry snorted. “He’ll probably throw a portkey at us and drop us in the Gringotts in Sofia or Gdansk, tell us to rob the joint. That’d be his style, wouldn’t it?”

“Then it would eventually turn out to be just a full-scale model he’d created one year because he was ‘bored.’”

Harry nodded. Olivetti was a great and unorthodox teacher. Harry had come to like odd teachers, so long as they actually taught. The tutors Harry had worked with...well, they knew why they were there and who was paying them. They did their jobs.

Harry really did wonder what Olivetti had planned. Harry hoped it would be a dry run sort of exercise. After all, Harry was planning to break into the Vatican’s Special Library of Antiquities in just a few days.

The Church couldn’t, or wouldn’t, admit publicly that its most secret library was a magical one, but that’s exactly what they had put together over the centuries: a library filled with books on light magic, druidic practices, mostly forgotten runic structures, long extinct magical creatures. All magics and traditions that the Catholic Church had had some role in destroying. These books had originally been kept as the spoils of cruel victories over the centuries. The Vatican’s Special Library held onto books they couldn’t even begin to understand. Harry, of course, didn’t have an appointment or even permission to use the library. No one ever received permission to visit the library unless he was a cardinal or higher in the church hierarchy. Instead of permission, magic would have to secure him the right to work inside the library, to copy out what he needed. That’s why Harry – and Sirius, to a lesser extent – had spent so long honing their skills in warding and wardbreaking.

Very soon, Harry's skills would be put to the test.

The room fell into silence as Sirius began to eat. A barn owl swooped in through the window with a letter tied to his leg. That caught Harry's attention.

"You want to or should I, Sirius?"

Sirius cast three detection spells at the letter before Harry even finished asking. They'd become very cautious in the last years – of necessity. After Harry's departure from Hogwarts, the Daily Prophet had delighted in dragging his name through the mud for three weeks. He'd been called a 'coward,' a 'dark apprentice,' a 'traitor to the British way of life,' a 'stain on the name of Potter,' and an 'embarrassment to all things Light and Good.' More than a hundred resulting howlers later, Harry had been fed up. He turned the whole mess over to a squib lawyer who enjoyed taking wizards down a few pegs. Seven lawsuits later, Harry was able to make a substantial donation to the newly created Press Responsibilities Foundation, the new owner of the Daily Prophet. The old Death Eater-allied owner had been sued into poverty; the Ministry had been thoroughly eviscerated, too, for its back alley links to the paper. Rita Skeeter had been the first vulture fired. Still, letters arrived from time to time with portkeys attached, or dangerous curses, or disgusting potions soaked into the parchment.

It was always better to check before touching.

"It's clean," Sirius said. He'd cast all the standard spells and a few of the ones he'd cooked up with his friend Remus Lupin in the last few years. (Remus, of course, had been hired to oversee the Press Responsibilities Foundation once he'd returned to Britain after a sort of forced self-exile.)

Harry untied the letter from the owl and fed the animal a few tidbits from Sirius' breakfast plate. The owl gratefully accepted the morsels and then flew off.

Harry flipped the letter over a few times. "It says it's from the International Confederation of Warlocks."

"Well?"

"Hold on, hold on. 'Dear Mr. Potter, As the Overall Individual Champion from the First TriSchool Tournament, I would like to invite you to serve as a judge for the Second TriSchool Tournament. Dates of the events are supplied below. Please send a return owl with your letter of interest or for more information. Regards, Kantor Streele, Headmaster of Durmstrang School, Host of the Second TriSchool Tournament.'"

"That was unexpected...and abrupt," Sirius said.

"Rather like all the Eastern Europeans I know..."

Sirius began to laugh. "So, you interested in this?"

"Don't know. The first one was the best fun I had all year at Hogwarts. Maybe...oh, no, the dates don't really work very well. I'd have to miss half the events because of school. When I'm at St. John's, I'm living like a muggle. Sure, I'll have my wand strapped to my leg, but I'm not using magic unless it's a last resort. And I won't be taking a portkey to...well, wherever Durmstrang is during my school term."

"Fair enough. Write back and maybe you can judge just one event or the ones you'll be on break for, kiddo."

Harry smiled. It wasn't a half bad idea. Maybe he might run across some of the old Hogwarts crew. Might be interesting to see how the years had changed things? Could he be real friends with Hermione or Ron – or would they always fit into that elusive 'school friends' category. People he'd been forced to associate with out of chance and circumstance, but not out of shared interests and passions. Harry didn't know.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It had been ridiculously easy to enter the famed secret library of the Vatican. It was hidden deep underground, sure, but it wasn't warded or anything. And no ordinary locks could keep out wizards, not even electronic locks. And video cameras could be, apparently, confounded. Harry and Sirius came in late at night, performed a Fidelius Charm on the place, and then set to work. They had a week in Rome and they really only wanted to spend a few days at most on the library issue.

Harry set to creating magical copies of all the useful books, scrolls, and manuscripts. Sirius began casting spells of all sorts to determine if the Vatican had any magical protections on it at all. Sirius had to extend the magical detection charm to a radius of seven miles before he detected anything at all...

"That's really odd, Harry. Since they obviously know of the existence of witches and wizards, you'd think they'd have some magic protections in place."

Harry shrugged. "Intolerance can overwhelm logic any day of the week, Sirius."

Sirius frowned a bit.

They apparated in and out of the library whenever they needed to. They spent four four-hour sessions copying everything they needed. And when Harry and Sirius left for the last time, they removed the Fidelius. They left no sign at all that they had been inside the Vatican.

But the secret about what the Vatican held began to spread. Odd books thought lost long ago began to pop up in odd places. The British Library – Wizarding Section received quite a substantial crate. The books were obviously copies, or copies of copies, but they were genuine. Eight hundred years worth of precious, rare books thought destroyed. A papyrus scroll that the 'Church' had stolen from wizards in Egypt three hundred years ago. There were tons of odd things in the box. None of them would be released for public viewing for many years until they were all properly cataloged and duplicated. These 'originals' would be stored in temperature and humidity controlled

vaults far below the main floor of the library. They were a secret for now.

Still, rumors broke out and people began to connect the dots.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

“Velcome to ze Second TriSchool Tournament. Ve here at Durmstrang are most proud to play host to zis grand magical contest. Today, ze first task. Ze Goblin Nation and Gringotts Bank have sponsored a most tremendous event. Each of ze sixty contestants will be given a chance to penetrate a simulated Gringotts Bank – to rob it...”

Sirius snorted. “Trust Durmstrang to structure events around committing crimes, right, kiddo?”

“Pot. Kettle. Black. Sirius Black, seriously, your mouth will get you into trouble one of these days.”

Sirius shut his mouth and the Headmaster of Durmstrang continued his opening remarks. Harry smiled inside. Trust Sirius to forget that they had just broken into the Vatican a few weeks earlier and copied an entire library’s worth of books. Oh, and sent some to various wizarding libraries across the globe to get people talking about what the Vatican might have done. That was high-level pranking. Who knew exactly what kind of chaos it could unleash?

“...today’s event will be judged by three senior goblins from Gringott’s Bank. Each subsequent event will be judged by three members of the sponsoring organization save for the finale. Our final event in late May will be judged by three competitors in the First TriSchool Tournament: Viktor Krum, Fleur Delacour, and Harry Potter, the Overall Individual Champion. But, for today, let us watch as the contestants enter the field. The event is not timed, but more and more reinforcements will arrive the longer the contestants take to complete the task.”

Harry smiled when he saw the empty stadium floor ripple from emptiness into a model bank in front of their eyes. It was an

impressive piece of showmanship. The model looked like the exterior of a Gringotts, but Harry could quickly tell it was far more secure than the typical Gringotts was. (It also had sixty sets of doors carved into its front.) The wards here were fresh and well reinforced.

This knowledge gave Harry an unfair advantage in assessing this task, of course. Harry had learned aura reading and silent magical detection charms from a witch in Bucharest: a very useful skill. Had the goblins known what exactly Harry Potter was capable of doing, they would have summarily banned him from ever entering a Gringotts.

A cannon sounded and all the contestants opened their doors leading into darkened Gringotts corridors. Screens similar to what had been used in the first tournament popped up. Harry decided to follow Ginny Weasley into the bank.

She made it two steps into the building before some invisible force stopped her cold. Her wand was out in a second and she was casting. Harry recognized all of her basic ward diagnostic charms. She was making a good start on the challenge. Perhaps her older brother Bill had given her some lessons in cursebreaking over the holidays.

Five minutes later, she was still analyzing the wards. Harry quickly surveyed the other contestants. No one else had yet broken through. Sirius was muttering to himself. It sounded to Harry like his godfather was plotting out which ward busters he'd use and in what order.

Harry didn't think the challenge was fair at all. He knew for a fact that Gringotts didn't use these kinds of wards in their lobbies. Goblins were fierce creatures, but they were also lazy and given to flights of fancy. No goblin ever imagined that a 'dumb brute of a wizard' would ever dare to steal from his bank.

This challenge, ergh, it was making Harry a bit angry. It could certainly be an amusing challenge, but it wasn't an accurate portrayal of what breaking into Gringotts would actually be like...

Oh, that was interesting. It wasn't at all accurate, come to think about it. And Gringotts was sponsoring the event. Why were they presenting this image of their bank?

Harry tapped Sirius on the shoulder as the other man was watching contestants try to batter down the wards. Harry whispered, "It's a publicity stunt, Sirius. Tomorrow every newspaper in the world will carry this story. It'll prove how impregnable Gringotts is...they don't even use wards like those. They were cast by humans and Gringotts never uses humans to ward its own banks."

"Really?"

Harry nodded. His eyes flicked back to the viewers quickly. Something was happening in Ginny's versions of Gringotts.

The wards had come down. Maybe Harry had missed it, but Ginny hadn't been attacking them with anything strong enough to cause that to happen. Harry then glanced at the other viewers. All the contestants were now free to move forward. This had been planned. None of them had actually used the right sort of magic to make the wards fall, that was positively dishonest now – was the whole event scripted out like this? It seemed less like a challenge than a special sort of amusement park ride... The TriSchool was supposed to be a contest, not a staged amusement.

Harry muffled his anger and watched the screen. He watched Ginny carefully move through the dark corridor. She knew that something was odd about the situation...and that's when the club came down and nearly killed her.

She cast a bludgeoner at the troll's club before he could try to attack her a second time. The long, wooden shaft exploded, planting a number of wood shards right into the troll's thick skin. Good for her. (Harry found he could be more just with his former friends now that he had a lot of distance from them.)

Then she found herself clutched in the troll's hands. It looked like it was going to pound her into a marble wall. In the nick of time, she threw a stinging hex at the troll's eyes. It dropped her, howling all the

while. The she summoned a set of brass scales from the side of the room. As it reached her, she ended the spell and then banished the heavy contraption at the troll's head. It missed a direct hit, but it did drive a cut straight through the troll's flesh. She tried again. Boom. It was down for the count.

Harry smiled. A good fight with a troll brought back some memories that weren't bad ones. Harry's wand stuck in a troll's nose. Ah, those were the innocent days, a misspent youth.

He quickly looked over the other monitors. A number of the contestants were down, with goblins and humans corralling the troll. Harry then watched as Ginny Weasley collected herself and continued down the dark corridor. Harry could tell there were wards ahead. But Ginny wasn't casting. And she walked right across them, triggering the wards. From just ahead of her position, loud clicks – and then a lot of clicking – filled the air. Two doors had opened and two acromantulas were now standing in front of Ginny, each deciding how to make the petite redhead into its next meal.

They weren't terribly large, not as big as Aragog had been, for sure. But there were two of them which would complicate matters. She tried a Fire spell. One of the beasts squealed in pain, but the other one leapt at Ginny. She tried to roll out of the way, but the beast managed to shove a leg down on Ginny's knee cap apparently wounding her, possibly breaking her knee. She wailed in pain before she shot a piercing curse at the spider's unprotected belly. Thick black ichor began spewing from its dying body. It seemed to cause Ginny even more pain once it touched her skin.

"That's horrible," Sirius said, watching the same screen. "She'll have to stop now."

Harry nodded. He looked away when he saw that Ginny was being tended to by a team of wizards.

He looked at the other screens. There were still four people in the running. All of them arrived at their vaults at approximately the same time. All four began launching spells against the vault doors.

“That’s stupid,” Harry muttered. “If it were me, I’d be casting some analysis spells. Sure it looks relatively undefended, but the goblins have stacked the deck...”

Sure enough, wards crackled to life in front of the doors. This Harry had expected. He knew that the primary Gringotts defenses were centered on the vaults – specifically on the vault doors. Attacking the doors, or any area close to the doors, was precisely what was needed to power up the defenses. The competitors had all behaved stupidly.

“Doesn’t anyone learn not to attack something straight on? Can’t anyone figure out weaknesses?”

Sirius shrugged. It was obviously one of Harry’s more common complaints.

This was the part of the event Harry had been waiting for and it was surprisingly disappointing. Two of the competitors were now immobilized by the wards; one was so strongly confounded he believed that magical radishes were attacking him as he screamed; the fourth has stopped momentarily to figure out what he could do. He turned and cast a powerful bludgeoner against the wall several feet from the vault door. A massive gash appeared and pebbles and rock dust rained down everywhere. He kept on casting. Four hits, five hits, six hits. He was through. The hole wasn’t big, but there was a hole. Then he peered inside the hole. He was searching out the small bag of gold he had to retrieve from the vault to receive full points for the event.

That was a mistake, it seemed. The vault door opened and seven armed goblin guards poured out. One of them slashed at the boy’s hand so that he dropped his wand. That was it. The challenge was over.

“Totally unbelievable. Complete publicity stunt, I knew it, Sirius...”

“Maybe you shouldn’t attend the rest of these, Harry. They are partially designed for entertainment value. And it’s not as if the goblins would actually show people how easy it might be to break into

Gringotts. Of course they made it more challenging for this public event...”

“But the real thing is plenty challenging to someone who isn’t a trained curse- and wardbreaker. They have dragons in there – okay, they’re a bit old and infirm, the ones I’ve seen near the Potter vault – but dragons are tough. And they don’t have goblin guards inside the vaults...and they don’t use acromantulas at all...and only a few branches use trolls inside the buildings...”

“Harry, pup, calm down. It’s not real. They shouldn’t have said it was. Take it in the spirit intended...”

“But... Aahh! Fine. I’ll calm down. I wonder if it’s too late to back out as a judge for the seventh event?”

Sirius shrugged.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

“Oh, no, Harry...”

“What now, Sirius?”

“Reading the paper after the TriSchool yesterday...”

“And what accurate, but highly critical things did Remus permit them to print?”

Sirius laughed for a moment, but his face fell somber again. “Every contestant was injured in some way. Four contestants are still in comas. Seven had to have bones removed and regrown. Two-thirds seem to have some kind of severe laceration. Three have the symptoms of acromantula poisoning... It’s a debacle. The paper is calling for the whole thing to be called off...”

“Good. They added in fake danger when the real stuff was just as interesting. Next Durmstrang’ll set up contestants to wrestle nude with a Dementor, a Manticore, and a banshee.”

"I heard a joke about a banshee and a Dementor, once, I think, kiddo..."

Harry wasn't paying attention to Sirius' attempts to distract him. "Who ever thought they could be trusted to run something like this properly, anyway?"

"Harry..."

"Fine. Anything else of interest?"

"Yeah. Someone broke into Nurmengard and broke out Gellert Grindelwald..."

"What?"

"Yeah, with all the attention on the first task, some dark wizards broke into the ICW prison in Germany."

"Why would someone want Grindelwald? Isn't he a hundred fifty years old? Not exactly a spring chicken."

"He still has a mind. May not be much of a fighter after nearly sixty years in a cell, but he can train other witches and wizards..."

Harry sighed. He had so looked forward to this Second TriSchool Tournament, but everything about it seemed wrong now.

"I don't suppose any of the magical governments know anything? The ICW?"

"If they do, they're not saying anything publicly. But I've heard rumors about a new Dark Lord calling himself Voss. He's out of Austria, I think."

Harry nodded. He'd seen some of the same reports. "Right, I remember. I think I read one item that said Voss claimed he was Grindelwald's grandson..."

"Oh," Sirius said. "That might explain the assault on the prison then."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry wasn't able to attend the second task. The public media's demands that the TriSchool Tournament be canceled died out after the ICW seemed unmovable on the topic. Even the Daily Prophet knew a losing proposition.

Harry's reason for not attending, at least the one he shared with his godfather, was that classes had just started at St. John's, Oxford, and Harry was beginning to meet and greet his fellow students. His animosity toward the new incarnation of the event went deeper, though. He wasn't sure he would have wanted to attend even had the dates worked out. There was something wrong with the Tournament. It was unlucky...or maybe even cursed in some fashion.

Nonetheless, he did receive a full report from Sirius, who certainly had attended.

"Harry, you missed a good one. As you guessed, Durmstrang set the rules for all the event sponsors to design by, so they're using a lot less logic challenges this time and more brute force and open warfare. Given the bloody nature of this bloody school, I guess it makes sense. They've never been accused to being subtle.

"This challenge was a bit like the giant challenge from the first TriSchool. One of those 'start at point A and get to point B' and 'don't trip over the monsters'. Except there were no giants this time. Nope: snakes! Lots and lots of snakes. You'd have probably gotten a headache from all the hissing going on, given your gift with the snake language. They'd created some kind of ancient Egyptian looking snake pit. I saw boomslang, runespoors, tons of non-magical snakes, even an occamy or four. No basilisks, thankfully.

"The funniest part was when the announcer – their bizarre Headmaster again – explained that the idea had been lifted from some Muggle movie. Kentucky Jones or something like it. Have you ever seen it? Oh well, the contest was brutal. Only eight of the sixty made it across, some of them were even bitten in the process. The

occamy are quite vicious if provoked, as more than a few people discovered.

“Ron Weasley was bitten within the first two minutes, no points. He was barely off the starting podium. Neville Longbottom was one of the people who made it across – still, he had a bite or three – earned a full fifty points. A youngster named Colin Creevey managed to fend off an attack by an occamy – quite impressive – before he got bitten by a boomslang. Hogwarts overall is in second place right now. Surprisingly, Beauxbatons is winning. Apparently their Care of Magical Creatures teacher is a fanatic about snakes. Six of the eight to complete the task were from that school.

“The task was brutal by any measure, but it seemed in line with the previous Tournament. I’m not sure if your concern is merited, Harry. Obviously Durmstrang has given the whole thing a darker, rougher flavor. But I suspect it may not be the complete disaster you were expecting. Who knows, though, I’d probably have lost the entire Black fortune on a stupid wager if I didn’t have you around to knock some sense into me from time to time. Keep your worrying on a low simmer, kiddo.

“I bought you a souvenir from one of the vendors. It’s a runespoor ‘plushie.’ It made me smile. Some enterprising chaps went out as soon as the task was announced and began transfiguring things to sell. They had occamy and boomslang, too, but nothing is more impressive than a three-headed snake. Have a great day, Harry, and enjoy the Muggle life. See you for vacation soon enough!”

Harry shook his head at the report. He was glad he wasn’t participating in this incarnation of the TriSchool Tournament. He thought Sirius was giving the Dumstrang designers a bit of an unfair ‘pass’ for creating something wrong or evil. Harry’s concern was definitely on a full simmer. The way things looked now, the seventh task would have the contestants trying to kill a Kraken with their bare hands or some such rubbish. Harry much preferred the more intellectual tenor of the tasks from the First Tournament. Harry wouldn’t have been able to get hundreds or thousands of snakes to kill each other, as he had decided he could have done to defeat the giants in the first task. This version of the challenge would have

required Harry use a lot of wand work and slaughter a lot of snakes. For all the similarities Sirius drew between the snakes and the giants, Harry knew it was a vastly different challenge.

He walked over to his desk and tucked the letter into a specially locked drawer in his desk. He had magically expanded it and kept anything related to magic inside it: Sirius' letters, some of the books he'd liberated from the Vatican, a sack of gold galleons, and various other items Harry wanted to keep on hand.

He sighed and picked up his assigned reading for the week. He was reading Economics and Management at St. John's College, Oxford. Harry did, after all, have to learn to put the Potter Estate back in order. Muggles had much better ideas about things like that than wizards or goblins. Both of those classes seemed to prefer stashing gold in underground vaults. Hadn't anyone heard of compound interest or holding shares in publicly traded companies?

But the reading was more than a touch dry. He'd performed very well on his A-levels in four subjects. He knew he needed this particular course more than any other in the Muggle world, but he was regretting not studying something a bit more entertaining.

At least he only had Muggle schooling to finish. That was something.

Harry was actually a fully qualified wizard now. He'd passed ten OWL subjects when he was barely fifteen and ten NEWTs subjects when he was sixteen. He'd scored strongly on his Muggle O- and A-levels. He'd taken the O- levels on schedule and the A-levels a year ahead of schedule. He'd done well enough that he'd been admitted to St. John's a year earlier than normal (he was seventeen) based on his grade reports, interview, and application alone – even with his status as a home-schooled student. No wizard did any memory tricks to get Harry admitted.

He plopped down into his desk chair and tried to puzzle over the reading. Why did economists write in such a dry manner? It was interesting stuff they were discussing, but the encapsulation of their ideas into language was almost impossibly gritty in his mind. He couldn't easily digest this stuff.

Blah!

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry and Sirius arrived on a blustery morning in early December to the site of the third task. Sirius had spent almost a solid week talking Harry into attending. Harry finally gave in because his godfather could be the most annoying person in the world when he wanted to be. It was only a few hours of his life, right? Plus, now Harry had something on Sirius. That was how they played life.

Harry looked at the location and saw how prominent a place the lake had. It reminded him of paddling around on the Black Lake during the final task in his last year at Hogwarts. Why did they schedule a water task for the dead of winter? Cruel bastards.

They made it into the stands before Harry made his first unpleasant discovery of the morning.

“Malfoy! What’s Lucius Malfoy doing here?”

“Parole. It was in the papers two weeks ago...”

“He raped and murdered for a lunatic and he only got three years in prison?”

“Minister Diggory put in a plea for clemency with the ICW officials...”

Harry hated politics. It turned even intelligent minds into simpering mush. Diggory had, by all accounts, once been a kind and decent fellow (better than his son Cedric at least). “How much of a bribe did Diggory take?”

“That was the first question I asked too.”

“Anyone else?”

“Snape’s on parole, a couple others, too. The old Voldemort gang, apparently, what’s left of it at least.”

“Don’t tell me Snape’s back teaching at Hogwarts?”

“Not even Dumbledore would risk that given the man has spent three years in prison. Dumbledore’s not a bright chap (book smarts count for little in my book, kiddo), but he’s not completely stupid.”

“Grindelwald’s out of prison; these Death Eater morons, too, semi-legally. Someone’s up to something.”

Sirius just nodded. “It does look suspicious, I’ll give you that.”

Harry just frowned.

Sirius was quiet for a moment before he said, “Something high profile like this event just screams to be attacked.”

Harry sighed.

Before he and Sirius could continue their conversation, the Durmstrang Headmaster began to speak from a small podium near to the lake. “Velcome to Bulgaria’s Dead Lake, ze site of today’s third task. Ze Society fur Darkness has created a most ... challenging event. There are two hundred chests sunk in ze lake. Twenty of them contain statues. The first twenty contestants to bring statues to the lake shore win. There is no time limit. In addition to the lake’s natural inhabitants, the Society fur Darkness has supplied a number of other amusing distractions...”

Harry’s eyes were wide open. What kind of a place was Durmstrang – he still hadn’t seen the school itself, as all the events had been held off the school ground but within a hundred miles of the place – where the Headmaster was such a cruel piece of work? And having something called the Society for Darkness sponsor the event? That seemed like an impending disaster.

Sirius was looking out at the Dead Lake. “Those aren’t logs, Harry...”

Not logs? “You mean they filled the lake with Dugbogs? Damned things look like logs, but they have sharp claws and teeth. Utterly vicious.”

Sirius looked a bit pale when he agreed.

“That lake is going to be red by the time we’re done with this event, I think.”

“I wonder why it’s called the Dead Lake,” Sirius asked.

“Probably filled with inferi...” Harry stopped speaking and felt some horror.

“Merlin, Harry, it probably is filled with inferi. How can you attack one underwater?”

“Where the hell did they come from in the first place, Sirius?”

“At some point someone from Durmstrang was probably involved.”

Harry felt the chills of unease wash over him as he thought about what sixty students were about to face. It was beyond inhuman to send people into inferi-infested water. Who in their right mind approved this debacle?

The cannon sounded and the students walked into the lake before Harry could think about lodging a formal protest. Inferi were banned under ICW treaties and conventions; they couldn’t be used in any ICW-sponsored contest or event.

Dozens of wizards on brooms zoomed out over the lake to keep an eye on the contestants. It was a dangerous challenge and they didn’t want anyone to be irreparably harmed. Harry sighed and slumped back into the stone bench he had been allocated.

“This is going to be a disaster...”

Harry couldn’t finish the thought before the first wizard dove toward the lake. When he flew off, he carried the semi-limp body of a student.

“It already is a disaster,” Sirius finished the thought.

The pair watched as student after student was hauled from the lake. Blood poured from some of them. Others were obviously missing limbs. The flying wizards were performing emergency field healing.

“Can they regrow a hand?”

Sirius shrugged. Healing magic wasn’t something he’d ever studied.

Harry and Sirius watched as another Hogwarts student was pulled from the Dead Lake when the second unpleasant surprise reared its head. Bright blasts of energy erupted from several places near the lake and viewing area. The Headmaster dove to the ground and only barely missed having a hole punched through his chest. Three of the flying witches and wizards were attacked as well – one was hit with something and fell into the lake.

It took Harry and Sirius only moments to stand and begin casting. This attack obviously wasn’t part of the challenge, was it?

“Accio invisibility cloaks,” Harry shouted.

“Finite,” Sirius began shouting.

Two cloaks rippled through the air. Sirius kept trying to pinpoint where the other attackers were located. The still-disillusioned ones continued firing which helped Sirius and the few other competent witches and wizards in the audience to locate them.

Harry took down one of the ones who’d been wearing a cloak. He pivoted to cast again, only to see a spell headed straight for him or Sirius. He shot the most powerful, borderline countercurse he knew. It impacted with the spell and sent it careening back towards its original caster. Within moments, the attacker lay dead from his own redirected curse.

Slowly but surely the other attackers were located, robbed of their invisibility, and then cursed. Only when one attacker remained

standing did the official guards for the event get their acts together and begin casting spells.

Harry and Sirius ran onto the grounds. Harry ran toward the lake to see if he could help the wizard who'd been knocked from his broom. He looked for anyone on the surface of the lake, but there were too many damned Dugbogs on the surface. Harry realized he didn't need to stand at the lake to help. He saw where the man's broom had landed and he summoned it.

Up in the air, he noticed all the other wizards on brooms had basically stopped doing their jobs. What a recipe for calamity. He saw two people floating on the surface of the lake. Harry didn't have time to waste. He summoned one, caught him, and put a levitation charm on him. Then he repeated the step. Why was no one else helping? Were the other wizards on brooms incapable of thinking in the midst of chaos? People could be dying.

Harry flew toward the ground, toward the medical pavilion, with his two 'patients.' "Help them," Harry shouted when his feet hit the dirt.

It took a few seconds before Harry saw anyone start moving his way. He'd never been so glad of assistance in his life.

The healers started in on the two people Harry had rescued from the lake. One was a Beauxbatons student; the other was the downed wizard. Both of them were predicted to survive.

Harry took back to the skies to search out anyone else. It seemed a few of the other wizards on brooms had gotten over their shock. They were actively searching for people at the surface of the lake too.

Harry was so scared for the people who had been hurt – and so angry this task was happening and that an attack on the event had nearly been successful – that he didn't come out of the air until the last child was out of the water. No one found a hidden statue.

There was a kelpie in the water – not as large as the Loch Ness monster, but close – and a juvenile, fifteen foot sea serpent. Harry got

angrier as he listened to the reports of the students who were being tended by the medi-witches.

Sirius eventually bundled Harry up after his questioning by the local guards – who'd wanted to hold him for killing someone – and the ICW officials – who commended Harry on his quick thinking. Harry was already composing a most scathing letter over this whole misbegotten attempt to resurrect the TriSchool Tournament. Harry wanted the Durmstrang Headmaster fired for his role in this disgusting creation.

Harry was back into politics, back in the papers, back in the public eye. Like it or not, Harry Potter was back into his 'saving people thing.'

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry boycotted the next event. Even Sirius did, although he thought long and hard about it. From what the newspaper accounts said, Beauxbatons and Hogwarts had difficult times finding twenty students of any age willing to participate in the next event.

One student, whose name Harry didn't recognize, had been quoted as saying, "None of us particularly want to have our bones ground to make some giant his bread. These tasks are getting worse; they're impossible; why did Headmaster Dumbledore agree to bring us here? I miss the castle. I miss a normal school year!"

The ICW stepped in enough to take over security as they had done for the first tournament years earlier. Of course, that was one step far too late. They had also launched an investigation into the event design – and overall event security. Harry knew that "investigations" were where true actions went to be buried. There'd be a commission of importantly named wizards formed, a report of some sort, probably issued just after the whole tournament was over, and then nothing would happen with the commission recommendations. Although politicians would point to it to say something had been done – as if paper and bureaucracy could kill a dark lord or stop an assassination attempt. Harry knew it was a roughly pointless political exercise.

Why did all politicians act the same everywhere? Commuting life sentences of former Death Eaters; refusing to take swift action on an imminent crisis; acting just like Britain's government had during Voldemort's first reign and his attempt to regain a body. Dark lord should be simple to handle: stop them early before they can amass a large support base and a wealth of resources. How come they always seemed to be given free reign?

Harry's written refusal to judge the seventh event had been interpreted by that insane Durmstrang Headmaster to be an invitation for negotiation. "No means no," was the entirety of Harry's last note. He even supplied the Daily Prophet with a copy of his first letter withdrawing his participation as a judge in the Tournament given the nature of the first three tasks. They published it with great fanfare on the third page of the paper, along with an editorial calling for Hogwarts to withdraw from this ill-begotten contest.

The problem was that, in the wizarding world, very few respected the word "no."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter was back for his Hilary Term at St. John's before he finally saw an account of the fourth task. From the published description, it didn't sound too horrible. Sirius had sent along a clipping, as Harry didn't take the Prophet when he was in school, and it wasn't complimentary but it seemed a fair assessment.

"Fourth Challenge of the TriSchool Tournament Completed with Minimal Injuries

"Unlike the vastly controversial third task of the TriSchool Tournament that was attacked by dark wizards, the fourth task, held today inside Durmstrang Castle in the Czech Republic, was a more sedate, although still dangerous affair. Contestants were told to surrender their wands and then were each locked inside dungeon closets with a single cauldron and a selection of unlabeled potions ingredients. Each contestant was given one hour to escape from their holding cells using only their knowledge and the potion(s) they could brew in that time.

“Several contestants were injured when their cauldrons prematurely exploded. All of them are expected to fully heal. Miss Hermione Granger of Hogwarts was the overall event winner, with a time of forty-seven minutes, twelve seconds. She received forty-three points, the bulk of her deduction coming from the loss of most of her hair during the explosion she caused that blew away her dungeon cell's door. She hadn't shielded herself adequately from injury, the judges decided.

“The event was sponsored by the Worldwide Society of Potions Masters. Its current head, Vargos Thoth, was one of the three event judges. Following the event he said only, ‘We designed an event appropriate for dunderheads. Most students can only manage to mangle potions, so we decided to reward incompetence by making the goal of the task a potion the dissolves wood, explodes, or otherwise does significant damage to a potions brewing room. We were not amused that so many contestants managed to escape, unscathed, from their brewing chambers.’”

Harry laughed at the Thoth man's quotation. He briefly wondered if Severus Snape had taken on a pseudonym as it rather sounded like what his old Potions teacher might have said.

In less pleasant news, Sirius also forwarded Harry yet another letter from Kantor Streeler, Durmstrang's Headmaster. “Dear Mr. Potter, To assuage your fears and concerns about the final task, I would be willing to give you and any other judge who requests it a guided tour of the seventh task on the day prior to the event. You may inspect it for safety and make your final decision at that time. I respect your right to withdraw from judging the competition if you can make an honest determination of its unsafe nature – but only if you make the determination based on actual facts. Cordially, Kantor Streeler.”

Harry sighed. It was a halfway persuasive argument. But Harry felt something wrong in that Streeler person. It wasn't just that Streeler's school taught Dark Arts – and that Streeler himself had held the position of the Dark Arts Professor before his elevation to Headmaster – no, there was something else.

Most people thought Streeler had been one of the intended victims of the attack on the third task. But Harry wasn't convinced. Especially when the captured and the dead wizard turned out to be low-level thugs from the Austrian underworld. Not the Dark Lord Voss's people...but somehow related.

The current theory Sirius outlined in his letter was that the attackers had been subjected to the Imperius Curse and ordered onto suicide missions. There was no way four wizards could hope to attack and escape from a location with a thousand or more adult wizards in attendance. Even if only one or two percent of them fought back it was overwhelming odds (and, to the shame of most attendees, only nineteen of the thousand-plus attendees actually did anything during the confusing battle). Was this Voss' way of testing security? Sending expendable thugs in to see what the reaction was? It had given him a lot of information for very little cost to his side.

The more interesting question to Harry mind was, why would a dark wizard like Voss attempt to kill the Headmaster of a school like Durmstrang? Was it philosophical – or a political statement of power and will (“I can get anyone anywhere”) – or had the Headmaster once been involved with Voss and turned traitor, like another Durmstrang headmaster from the past? Or was it just a misaimed shot? Even people under the Imperius Curse could fight the effect from moment to moment.

Harry wrote Sirius a three page letter and agreed to meet his godfather the next weekend in Oxford. He also promised he was still reading about – but not practicing – magic while he was in school. It was like a fourth subject as Harry was gearing up for his Preliminary Examination in Economics and Management. (It would cover his first year subjects of beginning economics, beginning management, and the fundamentals of statistics.) He had to pass his prelims, a painful university wide set of ‘public examinations,’ at the end of the year or he wouldn't be permitted to continue in his University studies. Do or die.

Harry began writing up his first essay due this week (two a week tutorials with their two a week essays wasn't as easy as it had sounded). He was doing a profile of a business for his management

course, dissecting it into bits as his tutor had instructed him. It didn't hurt that the Potter Estate owned a small chunk of the business and Harry was using his University course to learn more and more about his own holdings.

When he finished writing the essay later that evening, Harry was rather impressed with the company. It was a diamond mining firm out of Australia, with a rather forceful marketing and sales arm. It was a surprisingly good investment and seemed, based on the Oxford prescribed analysis techniques, like it was well managed.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sirius was going to be back in town tomorrow so Harry was in town doing some marketing. How his godfather could seem to eat his weight in food every day, Harry didn't know. It was the fourth week of January and the snow was dirty and gross under Harry's feet.

It sure kept Harry busy when Sirius would come for a visit on weekends. They'd explore the countryside together. They'd been to Stratford once and seen a Royal Shakespeare Theatre production. In a few weeks they were looking at a trip to the Cotswolds. Maybe another to the Lake District after that. Harry didn't think it strange that his godfather was also his best friend. They were both around the same mental age, even if Sirius was as old as his father and mother, had they survived.

Harry passed near Carfax in the center of Oxford when he noticed that he was being followed. Harry stretched out his magic and realized his pursuers were magical. Harry stopped to briefly admire a window display before he ducked into the mall on the pedestrian-only stretch of Oxford's main road. He immediately headed for the restroom. He stepped inside, tucked himself into a corner, and pulled his wand from its leg holster. He cast a powerful "Notice-Me-Not" charm. A few seconds later, two mulish-looking wizards entered the room and began looking around. One started kicking in the doors to the stalls. The other stood guard over the doorway.

"You sure the Potter kid came in here?"

A grunt was the only response. Harry waited for the pair to let their guard down before he struck. They were standing next to each other finally, whispering furiously at each other in a language Harry didn't understand. Harry cast a wide area stunning ward at the pair of them. They crashed into each other before falling to the floor in a heap.

Harry warded the doorway with a Muggle repelling charm before he turned to his would-be attackers. He quickly removed their three wands apiece from them, their portkeys, and a few devices Harry couldn't identify. They had been determined to do something to Harry. Kill him? Kidnap him? Drug him somehow?

Harry didn't know what their plan was, but he was determined to find out. He bound each one magically and erected several anti-transportation wards. He shot a truth telling compulsion at both men. Perhaps it would help with the interrogation Harry needed to do. Harry wanted answers.

He woke the shorter man. Harry's wand was at the neck of the man's partner. "One lie and I decapitate him, wizard. Then I begin removing your hands, arms, and legs until you tell me the truth. No lying to me!"

The man seemed groggy but nodded his head.

"Your name?"

"Stavros Andropoly."

"Greek?"

"My father was. My mother was from Bulgaria."

"Why are you here?"

"For you, Potter."

"To do what to me?"

"To take you alive to my master."

“Who is that?”

“The Dark Lord. Voss, the Dark Lord Voss.”

Dark lords were a bit of a Potter/Black specialty. It was an informal designation dark wizards liked to take once they felt they merited the extreme level of attention it would bring. Most liked to mark their followers to reward them and to keep them tethered to their master. One couldn't easily reenter proper society if one was bearing a magical dark mark, bribery of government official excepted.

“Do you bear his mark?”

The man nodded. His head tipped down to his chest. Harry ripped the man's shirt open. There, carved into the man's skin, was an eagle with a wand in one claw and a severed head clutched in the other.

“All who follow Voss have similar marks?”

“I don't know.”

Harry was amazed at how calm he felt even as he had just fought for his life and was now interrogating two wizards with far more experience than he possessed. He figured he'd collapse into a nervous wreck after this was all over; he hoped he would last until this was all over.

Harry stood up and returned to the other wizard. He pushed his wand into the man's neck and began to say the Cutting Curse.

“No, no, stop. I'll tell you. Everyone I know who works for Voss has this mark. But he may have others who work for him without it. Supporters who are not among his Dark Forces...”

“And what did this Voss plan for me?”

“I don't know. You were one of four targets today, I do know that. Two in England, one in France, one in Italy.”

“Why today?”

“Because all of the Aurors and guards are in Germany today for the TriSchool Tournament...”

Harry sighed. Of course. He’d freed Grindelwald during the first event. Attacked the third event. Now he was using the fifth event for a different sort of cover. This Voss person was surprisingly adept.

He’d caused havoc at that event and then all the security forces descended on the tournament for future events, leaving Europe surprisingly untended. It was a brilliant piece of strategy. Harry decided then that this Voss person was dangerous, not for the attempt on his life today, but for the plan he’d laid out – and made work – even under the noses of all the investigative forces in Europe. One with that kind of mind, a chess player’s mind, was not to be readily dismissed. He was using human nature against his adversaries; attack a weakness, others move to defend it, leaving only greater weaknesses to exploit. Voss was a thinker.

“Where were you to take me?”

“The portkeys were set for someplace in Austria, one of the Dark Lord’s safehouses, I think...”

“And who were the other targets?”

“I only know your name, Potter. The other teams were briefed directly by the Dark Lord. I heard the other locations from a piece of gossip before we all left. The Lord’s portkey creator was talking about his early morning’s work.”

Harry sighed. With only that kind of information, Harry couldn’t do anything to stop the other attacks.

“What does this Dark Lord look like?”

“I’ve never seen his face. He wears a cloak with special powers. His face is continually shadowed.”

“How old is he?”

"I don't know."

"What do you know of him?"

"I came to serve him because my father was loyal to his grandfather. He recruited me away from my work at Gringotts in Athens via owl and a personal meeting in a house in Albania."

"What did you do for Gringotts?"

"I was a cursebreaker for many years before I started to train their new cursebreakers. Many ancient Greek sites are inaccessible because of the strong magics still in place on them..."

This wasn't good.

"What does your companion do?"

"He worked for many years as an Auror in Poland. He serves as the Dark Lord's security chief now."

No, definitely not good. The Dark Lord's supporters weren't stupid, wealthy pureblood dilettantes. They were men with training, men who could train up even green recruits. This was very bad. Harry had caught them only because he had more training than anyone knew about. He'd lured them into an ambush. But an average witch or wizard wouldn't have been able to pull this off.

"How did you know I was in Britain? In Oxford?"

Harry had kept that fact out of the media. The only witch or wizard who knew was Sirius Black.

"The Dark Lord had his supporters tag you with a tracer – a chemical, not a spell – at one of the TriSchool events..."

Shit. Harry had of course tested himself and Sirius for every kind of tracing spell. But neither had considered more non-magical methods. This meant it wasn't safe for Harry to be in Oxford any longer. He'd

have to withdraw from school until he could make sure this Dark Lord wasn't going to be a further problem...

Harry couldn't endanger his fellow students. More wizards would come looking for Harry. Many people could perish. Harry wouldn't have that on his conscience.

Harry continued his questioning of the first wizard – and eventually the second one – for another thirty minutes. When he'd extracted all he could, Harry had to make a choice. He had a powerful cursebreaker and the Dark Lord's security chief in his control. If he released them to the British Aurors or even the ICW security team, what was to say they wouldn't escape or buy their way out of prison as Malfoy and Snape had?

Harry needed a permanent solution.

Harry chose what he hoped was the lesser of two evils. He wouldn't release these two foul beings to possibly kill, kidnap, and destroy ever again.

He levitated both of them into the handicapped stall. Harry drew his wand and placed two powerful piercing hexes into both of their heads. They slumped over, dying or dead. Harry had almost died as an infant in order to save the wizarding world; he had used his wits to interrupt what was likely a dark ritual to resurrect a dark lord three years ago; now he was willing to kill to keep his way of life intact and ensure the Muggles of Oxford never learned of magic.

"I would die for Sirius; I would kill for him or for myself."

Harry wasn't finished, however. To further disguise them, Harry sprayed them both with conjured kerosene. He set them both on fire. The piercing hexes would appear like bullet tracks; the fire would appear a method of hiding the identities of the dead men. It would work just fine for the Muggles who would discover them. It would also be horrifying enough to make the news; Harry would need a good explanation for withdrawing from St. John's.

Harry quickly broke all of the wards and charms he'd used to ensure uninterrupted time with his two would-be attackers. He left the pair for the Muggle police. It was unlikely they'd ever trace down Muggle identities for either man, not if they'd been of the pureblood supremacist sort. The Dark Lord would be left to wonder at their fate unless he had people monitoring the Muggle news.

Harry didn't really care. It wasn't like this Dark Lord could go complaining to the authorities about his missing henchmen.

When he returned to his room, he locked the conjured bag containing six wand, seven portkeys, and other miscellaneous items into his magical drawer. He pulled a mirror off a shelf and spoke the activating phrase. "I solemnly swear I am up to no good."

Then Harry spoke into the now magical mirror. "Sirius Black."

He kept this mirror as an emergency device. Strictly speaking the emergency had passed, but Harry was still shaken by what had happened, what he'd heard, and what he had done to solve the problem.

It was just a few moments before the mirror filled with Sirius Black's face. "I've been compromised, Sirius. Two wizards...oh, Merlin..."

"Pup, pup. Harry. What's going on?"

Harry's calm façade was rapidly cracking now that the adrenaline was tapering off. The full weight of what had happened was sitting on his mind, trying to break him into little pieces.

"It was horrible, Sirius. I was being followed, so I led them off and away from the Muggles..."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry waited until after lunch the next day before approaching the Economics Fellow for St. John's. He asked for an urgent appointment and it turned out the older man was free for half an hour after lunch.

“Sir, I have to make a confession. First, my real name isn’t James Harriman Evans.”

The old don leaned forward in his ancient chair. “What is it?”

Harry shook his head. “I can’t say. It’s a security issue. My family is quite well to do, but has been under death threats for a number of years now. We’ve been in hiding ever since my parents were murdered when I was an infant, sir. My present guardians thought it was only safe for me to come to university under a false name, sir, and now it looks like even that has failed...”

“That business at the shopping centre yesterday?”

Harry nodded hesitantly. “I got the phone call from my family’s chief of security this morning. I’m to be ready to leave by eight o’clock this evening, sir.”

The don looked positively shocked.

“You should come forward to the police, son, if you know anything...”

“I don’t know who they are or what happened to them. I only know I was told to withdraw from school to return into hiding, sir.”

The old man frowned. “You’re a good student, er, James. I hate to see you disappear, for you not to complete your education. That essay you wrote analyzing the Australian diamond mine was extremely good. Your tutor, Wickham, he shared it with me. I’ll even admit to learning something new from it...”

“Thank you, sir.”

“I’ll walk with you to the President’s office and we can explain this. I’ll smooth it over with the other Fellows, my lad. If your situation is resolved by next October, I’ll have a place waiting for you here.”

“Really, sir?”

“Yes.”

Harry wondered what he had done to inspire this kind of effort from the elderly man. He'd only had one term's set of tutorials with the man, although it sounded like he'd read some of Harry's essays for his other instructors.

"I'd appreciate that. I can be in touch via letter, I think."

"Fine, fine." The Oxford don stood up and ushered his soon-to-be-former student toward where the College President kept his office.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Sirius and Harry began dueling a few minutes after Harry returned to 12 Grimmauld Place. If a second dark lord was going to be attacking Harry, both Sirius and Harry wanted to be fully prepared.

The magic came fast and furious, excellent training it was but even better for taking Harry's mind off of what had happened. Harry was so focused on the spells he'd learned but not yet tried that he didn't have time to feel angry, or sad, or bitter. He just thought of magic. The magic danced inside him as he and Sirius dueled. In the end, Sirius won three matches, Harry eight, they came to a draw twice. A house elf had had to awaken both of them in both cases.

"I see you have kept up, Pup."

"I've tried. But it's better to practice than to read. At least for me. I never did all that well learning magic from a book, although the stuff we liberated from the Vatican has been very useful. Most of it would be completely unexpected, too, as the spells haven't been seen in hundreds of years..."

"Exactly, Harry. Exactly. When the time comes, and we both know it will, you'll be ready. We'll both be ready."

After Harry was thoroughly exhausted, he trundled up to his room. He noticed there were a few dozen letters on his desk, ones not important enough for Sirius to forward.

He flipped through them quickly. Ron Weasley, invitation to a Ministry Ball (already over), Ginny Weasley, Hermione Granger, invitation from someone Harry had never met who was having a birthday party in America, Colin Creevey and a packet of photographs of Harry (the kid was nice but he still creeped Harry out a bit), ICW paperwork for joining the cursebreakers' guild (why make it official what Harry could do?). Pleas for assistance; pleas for money or investment funds; pleas for licensing Harry's image for various products (no way, there would never be a Harry Potter Wizard's Hat); pleas for Harry to take up this cause or that one. Free the elves; fund a new wizarding public library; support the near-extinct golden snidget; support the parole of Clementine Verbena, wrongfully imprisoned for dragon breeding; vote for Amos Diggory, Minister of Magic; assist Madam Cecile Umbridge in recovering her mother's possessions from her dead father's estate, otherwise they'd be burned and precious family heirlooms would be lost forever.

Then a letter from Neville. This one Harry did read carefully, even though he was tired. Harry had kept up a correspondence with Neville over the years. He was a nice guy; still a bit shy, but nice. It sounded like he'd snuck out and bought himself a new wand finally after all the years of being forced to use his father's wand by his half-insane grandmother. Good for him. He also wrote he'd tried to meet up with Harry just after the first TriSchool event, but the crowds had prevented it before Harry had left.

Harry fell asleep long before he made his way through the rest of the stack. He'd save them for the morrow.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

It was only the night before the sixth task of the TriSchool Tournament that Harry even heard what had been done to the poor contestants during the fifth task. After all, Harry had been more worried about saving his own skin on that particular day.

"I listened to the announcer on the Wizarding Wireless. It was scheduled to last for eight hours, Harry, eight. It sounded completely brutal. The contestants were led to a room in the Durmstrang castle and told to remove their robes, cloaks, shoes, socks, and anything

other than a shirt and a pair of pants. They had to surrender their wands, as well. Then the event sponsor, some vile sounding person from the Durmstrang Alumni Association,

told them what they'd be doing. 'You will be running from now until you pass out. Ze path will lead you through ze Tungsten Forest. Ze one vurthest along and still standing in eight hours wins. Do vatch out for ze nasty creatures in ze forest, jah?' I almost fell off the sofa when I heard that. Running barefoot through a magical forest in the depth of wintertime?"

"Did anyone get hurt?"

"The correct question was did anyone not get hurt? The winner was a little second year from Beauxbatons who managed to dodge everything that came after her in the forest. She was the only one left standing, from what the announcer said. It was truly vile..."

"Then why did you listen to it, Sirius?"

He paused for a moment trying to cook up a defense. Finally he shrugged. "No idea. It was so awful I just had to keep turning on the wireless every few hours to see what new atrocity had happened..."

Harry just nodded.

"No one died, at least. No one yet. But if this keeps up, someone or maybe even sixty people, will likely die. Why isn't anyone putting a stop to it?"

"If not you and I, Sirius, then who? No one else seems capable of even drawing their own wand in self defense. Why would they work to stop something so vastly entertaining?"

Harry was grumpy again, his words were taking on a bitter flavor, and Sirius felt more than a touch of shame at his minor complicity in the whole affair.

The next morning both of them were up early to at least hear what the sixth task would be. Harry had a quill and a roll of parchment in case

he needed them. He figured he might need to dash off some letters to the British Ministry, the Daily Prophet, the ICW, and perhaps even his own family attorney to get some impending disaster averted. Harry hoped he hadn't waited too long to try harder to end this.

"Welcome, fair witches and gentlewizards, to our exclusive coverage of the sixth task of the TriSchool Tournament. Held on the grounds of the Bavarian Magical Preserve, this task seems sure to be the most difficult to date..."

Harry groaned and Sirius sighed at this pronouncement. As if running for hours, half-naked, in the freezing cold or swimming in inferi-infested waters wasn't hard enough.

"...the tournament host is mounting the podium. And here is Kantor Streeler, Durmstrang Headmaster. 'Good morning. Today our contestants will recreate an old task from a TriWizard Tournament of legend nearly three hundred years ago. Ze Magical Historian's Society is pleased to bring you 'Ze Cockatrice Chase.'"

Harry stopped listening at that point in the wireless broadcast. He only saw red.

What little Harry had heard of the old TriWizard Tournament had revolved around a disaster with a rampaging cockatrice. As Hagrid had never managed to procure one to show his classes – although he'd often moaned about how hard it was to find them even after the number of times he'd tried –, Harry had had to resort to the library to determine what they were. The answer was less than pretty. Half rooster, half snake or dragon. They were utterly unstoppable when enraged and they didn't possess pretty dispositions to start with.

Harry began filling the scrolls of parchment. He was concise and legalistic in his writing – unlike the rather bombastic, crude things Sirius was shouting at the Wireless – and he quickly wrote all the letters he needed to compose. Hedwig carried two of them; Sirius's owl carried the others.

Harry didn't mind throwing away what was left of his reputation on a matter like this one. Let people call him an alarmist so long as it ended up saving some lives.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry walked into the courtroom in Brussels. The final challenge was only three days away. It had taken more than a month to arrange for an 'emergency' injunction hearing before an ICW judge. What kind of emergency would wait for a month?

Dumbledore, Madame Maxime, and that Streeler fellow from Durmstrang were all there. Harry could identify a few Ministry types from Britain and there were a few others from other countries, too, it seemed. Harry and his attorney were the last to arrive of the parties named in the suit. Harry had refused to let Sirius attend because of his propensity to swear at public venues like this one. Harry wanted to win his injunction, not have himself and his godfather booted out of court before the proceedings began.

Harry took a seat and talked quietly with his lawyer.

Eventually a voluminous man in garish red robes entered the room and took a seat at the table in front of the room. And the hearing – er, negotiation – begun.

"Let's figure out what's going on here," the corpulent judge began.

The ICW lawyer who was supposed to defend the TriSchool Tournament did a very poor job of his defense.

Harry's lawyer, Procyon Cadwallader, began his portion of the hearing with a simple recitation of the facts.

"During the first challenge, all sixty students sustained injuries, forty-seven of them seriously enough to require overnight hospitalization, a handful were in hospital for two weeks or longer. The second challenge subjected fifty-seven students to at least one potentially fatal snake bite, only three competitors remained totally unbitten. The third challenge was not only attacked by dark wizards because of

ridiculously lax security, but all sixty competitors were injured by Dugbogs or Inferi. A few were also further wounded by a kelpie and a sea serpent. Nine of them had to have at least one limb regrown. Two will be permanently blind in one eye. After the uproar over the disastrous third challenge, the fourth one was revised. Only a handful received injuries severe enough to merit hospitalization. Then came the fifth challenge. Every competitor needed to have at least eight square inches of skin removed and regrown due to severe frost bite. Twenty-three students lost consciousness for more than a day because of the severe conditions of the challenge. A full forty-two were attacked and injured by one or more monsters surrounding the Durmstrang forest. And, finally, we come to the sixth challenge. Three people are still in comas from cockatrice venom. Seventeen people had bones so crushed they had to be vanished and totally regrown. Might I remind everyone that only twenty two competitors faced the monster before it went on a rampage, as predicted by history. One hundred twenty-nine members of the audience were wounded, seven fatally, before ICW security wizards destroyed the animal. For the life of me, gentlewizards and witches, I can't even imagine why we're having this hearing at all. It's obvious that the TriSchool Tournament should be halted immediately. Furthermore, the entire committee headed by Durmstrang Headmaster Kantor Streeler should be suspended from their positions with the school until they can be adequately prosecuted for their negligence and their malicious intent in crafting such cruel, devilish tortures. Investigations should be launched into why Professors Dumbledore and Maxime have not withdrawn their schools from the competition, as it is entirely voluntary according to the set of rules drawn up before the First Tournament."

The fat judge smiled in an unctuous way. Harry had a very bad feeling about that man. Harry had been watching the disgusting piece of humanity while Cadwallader spoke. The man hadn't paid any attention. He'd been fussing with a sheet of paper on his table.

"I find that your client doesn't have standing to lodge this complaint, Mr. Cadwallader..."

Ah, yes, the judge was going to ignore the facts and concentrate on the minutiae. Was it any wonder most dark wizards began their reigns

by killing all the lawyers and judges? If they infuriated Harry, then they certainly angered everyone else, Dark Lords included.

Harry listened as the fat waste of humanity proved how the most villainous like hide behind legal niceties. Harry was ready to pull out his wand and apply some judicious piercing hexes to most everyone in the room. He was a certified killer now, he admitted to himself. He'd discussed it with Sirius. Ending a few lives here – and spending the rest of his own in Nurmengard – wasn't the worst thing Harry could imagine.

But before Harry had more than considered the notion, the Durmstrang Headmaster rose from his seat.

“Honored magistrate, if I may, I do not want the Tournament continued on such a technicality. Mr. Potter's attorney has said unpleasant things about me today, but I would prefer to show the good side of Durmstrang rather than try to hide behind silly laws and loopholes. It is true that more students have faced injuries than we expected when we designed these events. It is true that our best attempts to keep the Tournament both challenging and reasonably safe have failed. But, I beg all of you, to come and inspect the seventh task before you pass a judgment on it. I offered this very proposition to Mr. Potter via letter some time ago. I offer it again. Make a reasoned, intelligent decision today. If Mr. Potter truly feels that the challenge is unsafe as designed, I am willing to listen to reason. I do not want to needlessly place students in danger...”

If Harry disliked the fat judge, he positively loathed this disgusting Headmaster. He had Albus Dumbledore's silver tongue combined with Lucius Malfoy's brand of lying and distortion. This man was beyond evil; every ounce of Harry's magic recognized it.

Harry recognized it was a very bad thing when the corpulent judge smiled. “Yes, yes, perhaps that is a better solution. I hate to dispatch such a public case for such a petty reason...”

The judge had obviously taken a bribe or three. He was now opening the way to this ‘compromise’ to avoid being caught out with his hand accepting a thick envelope. Harry wondered who had supplied the

bribe. Wizarding mafia determined to see the seventh event played out for the betting opportunities? Durmstrang alumni? The Dark Lord Voss? Who knows what kind of mayhem a dark lord could exact when the world's aurors were assembled trying to keep children from being needlessly killed by an insanely designed tournament.

Harry realized his only remaining (legal) hope of ending the TriSchool Tournament was in visiting the site of the seventh challenge to view it for himself. He sighed.

"Fine, I would be glad to pass judgment on what they've created."

Harry leaned over to whisper in his attorney's ear. He wouldn't allow Cadwallader to attend this little stunt, as it was a magical challenge and his attorney was a squib and unable to defend himself in this kind of situation. "Get word back to Sirius about what's happened here. Make sure the appropriate people know I've gone back to Durmstrang to see whatever torture they've devised."

Harry looked up at the others after he saw his lawyer leave the room. "Are we leaving from here?"

The Headmaster smiled. "Judge, I assume you're joining us? Headmaster Dumbledore? Headmistress Maxime? Good, let's be off." He didn't even bother to acknowledge or invite the officials from the various Ministries. Some looked rather put out.

Harry touched the portkey that Streeler offered to each of them.

He promptly felt more than a bit nauseous when he landed with the others in a darkened corridor. He picked himself up off the stone floor. He felt tempted to offer his hand to the massive Olympe Maxime, but did not do so. It was her fault as much as Dumbledore's that this stupidity had been allowed to get so far along. The Tournament would already be over if either Hogwarts or Beauxbatons withdrew. Perhaps that was the reason it was still running – school pride, neither Head wanted to be the one to take the 'blame' for ending the contest. Rubbish.

Harry unleashed his magic and sensed that there were a number of very magical beings – not witches or wizards, however – nearby. He had a very bad feeling about this, but Harry also brought along a number of tricks and skills no one but Sirius knew about. And he also had a backup team in place, a team that was being warned right about now that it might be needed. (If the legal proceedings failed to end the Tournament, Harry was prepared to send in a team of mercenaries to destroy the challenge, whatever type of monster it might be.)

“The entrance to the seating area is just this way. Please follow along.”

Harry began walking only to remember that Streeler’s heavy Germanic accent had been along non-existent today. Why was that? Was he more polished in a stressful situation? Or was Streeler not Streeler today?

Harry was the last one through the doorway. He kept his eyes very clearly on this Streeler. How long had the man been in his presence? Less than an hour, for sure. He had seemed very eager to short circuit what could have been a lengthy hearing. The fat judge would have had to do a lot of fancy talking to avoid the merits of the case just to focus on the minutiae. Streeler ended that rather quickly.

Perhaps. Perhaps this Streeler wasn’t Streeler. Had the Dark Lord Voss finally assassinated him – and gotten someone to take over his appearance and role inside Durmstrang?

“This eight room chamber is the final task. It was designed by the Cursebreaker’s Society of Egypt to replicate one of their harder tomb experiences. It relies upon a combination of cursebreaking and creature handling. Contestants also have access to a number of clues in Egyptian hieroglyphics throughout the task. It’s a rather well balanced task, if I do say so, requiring academic skills, language translation, bravery, fortitude, strong wand abilities, and other skills to compete in it.”

“And what creatures are you using, Mr. Streeler,” Harry asked.

The Headmaster nodded. "Look down and I will illuminate the rooms."

The first room seemed a water logged mess. Harry could make out a banshee and three auguries for a room full of rain and deadly wailing.

"This is to be tackled by a five person team from each school?"

The Headmaster nodded. Harry was fine with the first room. It had the potential for causing damage, but any fifth year should be trained up to deal with a banshee.

The second room became visible. Harry swallowed. "Bicorns? Flesh-eating bicorns?"

Even Dumbledore had the good sense to look a bit embarrassed. It usually took a team of ten to deal with a bicorn.

"Is this inappropriate? Our Care of Magical Creatures instructor teaches bicorns in the fourth year, as we have a number in our forest."

"Vastly inappropriate." The slippery Headmaster seemed to jot himself a note.

"The third room is much simpler. Can you tell what the challenge is?"

Harry looked closely at the illuminated space. It seemed empty. There were several suits of armor, a few oversized chairs... "Chameleons of some sort? Chameleon ghouls, perhaps."

The Headmaster nodded. Harry was fine with that. The fourth room was not fine, however.

"Two erumpents? I don't think so. They have explosive liquid in their horns. They could blow themselves up and a roomful of contestants and a fair bit of the audience..."

Harry finished his mini-rant when he noticed the others agreeing with him.

The fifth room was filled with flesh-eating slugs. Easy enough to kill with fire. The sixth room had a graphorn and two griffins. Dangerous and noble creatures. Harry sounded off about that, too.

“Griffins are far too endangered to destroy in something as petty as a tournament. Fine for the graphorns, but return the griffins to their sanctuary.” Harry knew he sounded cold when he made the pronouncement, but he had certainly grown colder over the years. One couldn’t remain pure as the driven snow with the kind of upbringing and life Harry Potter had experienced.

The Headmaster smiled. His teeth were yellow and eerie. “Fine, fine. The eighth room is quite simple. Just Devil’s Snare obscuring the trophy that needs to be collected for the timer to stop. It’ll be run three times of course so that each time may show their best time. The seventh room, well, the seventh room... it’s the very best thing in the entire tournament...”

As he said that, Harry noticed the disgusting man touched a lump of stone that wasn’t quite flush with the rest of the wall. Suddenly, Harry and the others, save the Durmstrang Headmaster, began to fall. Harry reached out and snagged the man’s robes. That bastard was coming with – wherever they were all headed.

It turned out that they landed in the seventh room. Harry had drawn his wand in time to stun the treacherous Durmstrang headmaster. Now they had to face whatever was in the room. The lights slowly came up.

“A quintaped? Where did they steal one from? Deadly and endangered,” muttered Madame Maxime.

Harry was more concerned with surviving the encounter than analyzing how it had come to be. For the creature attacked swiftly. In one move, three of its five legs struck out. One lanced straight through the stunned Streeler’s throat. Another one stabbed into the fat judge’s belly. A third one narrowly missed Madam Maxime after she threw herself backward.

Harry and Albus began casting. Harry was focused on its sharpened feet. Albus was aiming for its head and eyes. It was ten feet tall, a fully grown adult, and it seemed more vicious than the ones Harry had heard of from Hagrid and from his own reading.

Finally Madame Maxime recovered and began casting against the massive monster's torso. The whole room was covered in blood and gore by the time it stopped moving. Streeler was dead. Harry could care less about the corrupt judge.

"We need a solution fast. But, I do have to say this one time. Did no one else see that there was a problem here? Albus, you're an idiot for letting it get this far. And Madam Maxime, I've met you a handful of times, but you should have known better, too.... Okay, I'm better. We're in the present now. So how in the world do we get out of here?"

Albus pointed toward the room that Streeler said contained Devil's Snare.

"You sure? This lying sack could have told us another lie..."

"I'd rather try it than try to face off against two erumpents, Harry. Don't forget the graphorn and the griffins, too. And a bicorn."

Moving forward seemed the completely logical thing to do. Streeler had spent a lot of time explaining the rooms inside this chamber of horrors before he activated that disappearing floor.

"Maxime?"

"It's fine. Let's go forward..."

It seemed too logical. They were shown what was behind them; only told what was ahead of them. Forward seemed the best choice. But that was thinking too narrowly. In any situation, there were always more than two choices.

"Hold on," Harry said. "Let's not be too obvious about this. Streeler had been planning to lure at least me to this place for quite some time.

He had a switch set up in that viewing room. This wasn't a spur of the moment thing. Let's try something less predictable. We could blast through a wall or through the ceiling. That viewing room was above us somewhere, we could levitate ourselves... No, Albus, stop, listen to me, you bastard. Don't touch the door..."

Everything went black. The light, Harry's level of consciousness, everything.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry woke up to the sounds of screaming. He turned his head, tried to clear the mental fog, and saw Lucius Malfoy, Severus Snape, and a few wizards Harry didn't recognize casting the Cruciatus Curse in turns on Madam Maxime.

They tired of their game a few moments later. Severus Snape cast the Killing Curse at her.

"Always was curious if giants and half-breeds like Hagrid had some immunity to the Unforgivables. Guess not."

Harry began analyzing the situation. He and Albus were still alive, but his former Headmaster was still apparently unconscious. There were at least seven wizards in this room. Who knew how many else outside here. The odds weren't great.

Harry concentrated and used a piece of magic he'd learned from the Vatican books. He activated a tracing object that he and Sirius had enchanted in the off chance Harry was ever successfully kidnapped. The object now came to life in 12 Grimmauld. It was powerful enough to tell Sirius precisely where Harry was, even through thick wards. Hopefully Sirius was paying attention to it; hopefully he'd dispatch the mercenaries he and Harry had put on retainer. This was going to be bloody.

Harry thrashed around a bit. He wanted the others to know he was awake. He wanted as many of the opponents to be in this room as possible. He needed to help clear the path for the mercenaries – and

to prepare for his own special form of attack. Harry had one chance to aid the mercenaries who would be coming along soon.

The most valuable tome Harry had liberated from the Vatican was a miniscule thing, barely a dozen handwritten pages between two pieces of board. It contained only the instructions and theory for one spell, a very powerful, very ancient spell.

Harry had practiced casting it. He had achieved a partial effect four times in his life thus far. It was immensely draining. If it failed in the casting, it could also knock its caster unconscious for an hour or longer. It was uncommon magic to be used only in situations of uncommon danger.

Harry thrashed around a bit more. Eventually Snape came toward him. "Oh, Potter, you're finally awake. Too bad my Master has other plans for you. I'll be around to watch. Don't forget it, Potter, I'll be around to watch you die..."

Harry had come to term some weeks earlier with his decision to kill those two would-be kidnappers. His new philosophy, which he hoped to apply to Snape, was to never leave enemies in a position to hurt him ever again.

Either Harry or Snape would die this day. Malfoy, too. Everyone in this room.

That was when the door opened. A man in a strange cloak came in first. Harry couldn't see his face: it was either Voss or someone pretending to be him. Then a wizened old man was levitated behind while seated in a chair. He looked positively ancient and shriveled, but his head was held high and his eyes danced with the light in the room. Harry had a bad feeling about that wizard.

Harry began the internal chanting to activate his attack. He needed a minute or longer to do all the steps, to clear his mind, and then cast the spell wandlessly. It was immensely complicated. Harry needed more time than he apparently had. Harry knew that all the important people were in the room finally.

“The great Dumbledore,” the cloaked man almost hissed. “How the mighty are brought down by arrogance. Gellert, would you like the honors?”

The cloaked man handed a wand to the ancient creature in the floating chair.

“Avada Kedavra.”

The green light hit Albus Dumbledore and extinguished his life.

“The man never learned to clean up his own messes. Sure, he defeated my grandfather in a great duel, but he left him alive. And now Dumbledore is dead by Grindelwald’s own hand.”

Harry was shocked out of his meditative trance. He had been no lover of Albus Dumbledore, but to die in such a fashion. It was horrible.

Harry began his mental chant again after he calmed himself. The cloaked man, obviously this Voss character, walked toward Dumbledore and relieved him of the odd looking wand the old wizard had used.

“I believe this belonged to you originally, grandfather.”

“Thank you,” the old sack of bones whispered as he accepted the wand. “Lumos.”

A light greater than any Harry had seen flared from the wand. It was truly a powerful weapon.

Harry continued chanting. He was almost there.

“Harry Potter, I am so glad to meet you finally. I believe you ran into two of my men. I never did get an exact confirmation of what happened to them. I suspect I could convince you to share that information with me. But, more on that later. I want to tell you what will be happening to you. Fear makes everything better.”

He pulled the hood from his head. Harry finished the chant in that instant. He hoped the revelation hadn't sufficiently broken his concentration. He could feel the magic working, but he could also feel a bit of pain creeping into his own mind and body. Had he gotten it right? Had he screwed up?

He didn't know.

But he did recognize this Dark Lord Voss. Harry had been suspicious of the man almost from the beginning, but he'd never put together the cruel Durmstrang Headmaster with this feared Austrian dark wizard. Why not? Heading a school, recruiting from the students, having a strong public face to hide his private acts and depravities – wasn't that one of the rumors of what Voldemort had once wanted to do?

"The quintaped killed you?"

Streeler just smiled.

"Is your name even Kantor Streeler?"

The evil man nodded. "It's how I was born. I was kept from my true heritage, my rightful birthname of Grindelwald, by my terrified father. My now late father. Streeler is the name of a deadly snake, but it nothing compared to the terror of the Grindelwald name. I thought it time to refresh everyone's memories. To bring the old ideas back into play. I've been planning this – and watching you, Harry Potter – since that first tournament, since Karkaroff and his simpering deputy Katarina were arrested. I was elevated into the Headmastership, a perfect place for my needs. I arranged to stage this next TriSchool Tournament just as soon as I had the information and the resources needed to free my grandfather and begin the rest of my plot. The events I staged enraged and confused people; they were perfect to camouflage the real things I was doing. Funny, wasn't it, that I used all the great hallmarks of a dark lord as clue in the challenges: treacherous goblin warriors, snakes of a dozen varieties, and Inferi. I thought that challenge a bit over the top, a bit obvious, that's why I had my men send in those thugs to make the story a bit more interesting, a bit more muddled. This ridiculous tournament has proven most useful to me and mine. Too bad you didn't cooperate

two months ago or we'd already be into the Great New Age. Of course, I'd always recognized the possibility you might be a tricky customer, so I arranged months and months ago for you to be a 'judge' just so I could have a reason to bring you here to my chamber of horrors. Killing that parasite of a judge – and these idiot school Heads – was just an unexpected bonus."

Harry was glad that the man was ranting and not casting spells. The longer Harry could allow the man to talk, the more chance the spell would settle in unnoticed (Harry assumed it had worked to some extent as he was still conscious). And it left more time for the calvary, as it were, to arrive.

"As for you, Harry, you managed to cause the death of a most useful deputy of mine, Antonin Dolohov. I arranged his secret parole from Azkaban seven months ago. He'd been switching off with me to appear as 'Headmaster Streeleer.' Polyjuice is so useful. So, now we come to your part in all this. I need you, Harry, for an important ritual to revitalize my grandfather. Your power and youth, the beauty of a stunning witch, the ferocity of an untamed centaur, and the loyalty of the most subservient house elf. Just like that ridiculous fountain in the British Ministry, isn't it? Who knew they had encoded the formula for a very dark ritual in their public statuary. Idiots!"

Harry knew the ritual. Was that the reason there were four missions a few months back? To find a centaur, a witch, and a house elf for this sacrifice? The Forbidden Forest? And a witch and elf from the Continent?

All Harry knew was that all of them were still alive. They had to be – the ritual demanded they all be killed at the same instant.

Harry suddenly had to suppress a smile. He could suddenly feel more witches and wizards nearby. He knew the mercenaries were on their way in. Wouldn't they find a surprise when they began casting inside this room? Wouldn't Streeleer's followers be surprised as well?

"Malfoy, bring in the other 'volunteers.' My grandfather isn't getting any younger."

The right hand to two dark lords left the room.

“Streeler, I hope you’ve considered this already, but your grandfather will kill you once you give him back his youth. You know that, right?”

“Potter, you fool, my grandfather will serve as my right hand...”

“Because Grindelwald rose to power by joining and betraying at least three dark wizards that I know of. One in Rumania; one in Albania; one in the present Czech Republic.”

“The boy lies,” the talking skin whispered.

It was enough to put doubt and fear into the moron Streeler.

“I researched his history once I’d learned he’d been broken out of Nurmengard. Don’t know much about your own history, do you, Streeler?”

“Call me Lord Voss, you child.” He looked angry enough to punch or curse Harry, but he couldn’t due to the requirements of the ritual.

Malfoy returned with the immobilized, levitated forms of a witch, a centaur, and a house elf. Malfoy set them down near Harry. This was now a tricky part. Harry was fairly sure – ninety percent or so – that these fools wouldn’t be able to cast magic as long as Harry maintained consciousness. But they could still use other weapons or one of them could accidentally knock Harry unconscious.

Harry’s master plan had always revolved around the mercenaries coming to save him. Great plan, huh? But once they arrived, the battle would be over. The magic nullification field Harry had brought into existence was powerful old magic. The book he’d read indicated it been developed for muggle kings of long ago to be able to meet safely with the witches and wizards of the realm. The court wizard would cast it, then bring in the supplicants. The king could sit easily, assured there could be no magical betrayal or assassination attempts.

On the plus side, Harry felt the invading force closing in on his position. If they carried the enchanted object he and Sirius had

created, it would literally lead them to within four feet of Harry's current position. He closed his eyes and concentrated on strengthening the magic nullification field. If he could make it strong enough by sheer force of will, it could even cripple the wizards in this room by filling them full of pain, enough to drop them to their knees. Their own magical cores in the presence of an overwhelming magical nullification field would topple them.

As Harry meditated, Streeler assembled the ritual components. He placed his grandfather on a ritual table made of pure onyx. He opened a chest and withdrew four goblets, one for the blood of each sacrifice. Then he pulled out the four gleaming blades that would do the work.

He instructed Snape to place a small cauldron on top of the altar next to his grandfather. Snape set to brewing a simple concoction. Water, a few leaves, and a bezoar.

Harry worked through the strengthening procedure. Then he started it again. And again. He sped up. His mind flew through the magical words. He could feel the magic in the room thickening, turning into a kind of invisible netting. He kept up with the chanting. Streeler fell to the ground writhing in pain as he hefted the knife to cut the house elf's throat. The others in the room followed suit moments later. Harry saw none of it. He was deeply inside the trance, deep enough to almost become lost forever. Deep enough to surrender himself to an interior life.

It could have been minutes or hours until someone finally roused Harry from his trance. "You Harry?"

Harry didn't recognize the voice. He was terribly groggy. He blinked twice before he heard the question again.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm Harry."

"You want them bound?"

"I want them dead. I'll handle that part, I think."

Harry was suddenly freed from his bonds. He took a few minutes to collect himself. He felt weak. His magic felt weak. But he had enough for this.

He walked over to where Gellert Grindelwald lay on the ritual altar. Harry instructed one of the mercenaries to levitate Grindelwald back to his sometime floating chair. Harry pulled the odd looking wand out of Grindelwald's pocket, the one Dumbledore had always wielded in Harry's presence.

"I'll be finishing up Dumbledore's legend. He vanquished you once, now he's about to do it again, even though it cost him his life. Reducto!"

Harry walked over to Dumbledore and set the wand near his former Headmaster's right hand. He felt a bit sad, not over the man's death, but over the manner of it. Every great witch or wizard should have the right to perish in battle. Not as a captured and bound prisoner in a disgusting hovel of a room. Not without the recourse of fighting back. Harry granted Dumbledore the sort of death he himself would wish for.

Harry stalked across the room and plucked a wand from one of the wizards he didn't recognize. The piece of wood seemed to respond moderately to his magic. Harry turned to face Kantor Streeler. Harry woke him.

"I killed your grandfather, Kantor. I made sure that Dumbledore will forever have the credit for finishing him. How do you like that? I can rewrite history, too, you worthless excuse for a wizard. Lacero."

In turn, Harry visited every enemy witch or wizard. He used Lucius Malfoy's wand to behead Severus Snape. Harry did good work. Snape would never be known as Semi-Severed Snape even if he did become a ghost. Lucius Malfoy died when he fell and struck his head against the hard stone wall. The others received mortal wounds from magical and 'accidental' means.

When he finished up, it seemed a grand battle had been fought here. Dumbledore and the weakened Grindelwald had defeated each other, which incited a panic amongst the others. Spells flew, people dodged

in the tiny space. And then the reinforcements came and didn't bother mending any of the fallen. They were interested in only the hostages. The enemy wizards bled out while the hostages were rescued.

It was a weak story, but it wouldn't be important compared to the embarrassment everyone was about to face. The TriSchool Tournament had been organized by a Dark Lord to aid his plans; Harry Potter and several others had been kidnapped with the aid and cooperation of a corrupt ICW judge; the ICW and the British Ministry had several times supported the Dark Lord, even granting him new followers after taking bribes; the heads of all three great schools in Europe were dead; Dumbledore himself had triggered a trap, against better advice, that led to his and the others' capture. Dumbledore had gotten himself and Madame Maxime killed in a sense.

Harry took magically binding secrecy oaths from each of the mercenaries never to reveal what they'd seen. He ordered the lead mercenary to knock him into a magical coma and levitate him out of the room along with the other hostages. This was Harry's weak alibi. Kantor, after all, had apparently decided that Harry and others needed to be unconscious for the planned ritual to work. Harry, officially, hadn't seen a thing after he'd been knocked unconscious in the seventh chamber.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

"I'm sorry that they stunned you when you insisted on coming, Sirius. But I wrote up the contract. You weren't allowed to join the team."

"I'm still mad about that, Harry."

"We're both safe, Sirius. We knew they'd keep coming, the kidnappers. The enchanted locator object worked well. The magic nullification worked to such an extent I was able to knock them out with the pain. I wasn't able to save Albus or Olympe, but I didn't get us caught either. Albus never would listen to what other people told him."

"That's right, Harry. Don't forget that."

Harry had insisted on getting out of St. Mungo's almost as soon as his magical coma faded. He hated that place. He hated all hospitals.

Now he was back with Sirius in 12 Grimmauld Place.

"It's fine. Fine, I tell you. I haven't been this happy – to have you back – since you convinced Minister Diggory to give me a trial after he stepped in for the late Minister Fudge. I'll never forget the looks on their faces when they heard my testimony under veritaserum or when you corroborated it. Remus, unfortunately, had to leave Britain for a while because of the uproar over his almost harming you and the others when he transformed into a werewolf, but he waited it out. And now you're here. You're safe again."

"And I have the summer off, Sirius. I'll send a letter to St. John's in a month or two and see if they'll still let me restart my course of study. If not, I'll go somewhere else."

"So, what should we do until then, Harry?"

"It's insane here. They're mourning Dumbledore. Hogwarts is a disaster, half full of wounded children still recovering from the Tournament. A split board of governors trying to settle on a new Headmaster. They're even trying to make me out to be some sort of hero even though I was technically and officially in a coma. Plus, all hell has broken loose in the Ministry again. Diggory'll be out over paroling Malfoy and Snape. Not so smart to be seen in the pocket of those who immediately went and joined up with a new Dark Lord. It'll simmer down in a few months, I hope. Maybe." Harry sighed. "We need to leave. And we can't go back to Italy now that it has hundreds of wizards more or less laying siege to the Vatican. Let's go someplace far away. India? China? You pick this time, Sirius."

"Russia. Definitely Russia. They've got some old wizards in out of the way places that know things that would curl your hair, Pup. And we'll go visit them all. And we'll soak it all in. And the next person who screws with you...well, you melt his face off or you permanently transfigure him into a lump of manure. Something creative, Harry, something funny."

“I can do that, Sirius. I know I can do that.”